Biking to Beat Meniere’s Disease

Schwier donates over $5,000 to AHRF for research.

Steve Schwier, age 53, was diagnosed with Meniere’s disease (MD) in 2013. Since then, he’s had vertigo episodes with dizziness and nausea, along with ongoing tinnitus, permanent hearing loss, and insomnia. He was a heavy-equipment operator until three years ago, when the illness forced him to discontinue working.

In 2020, Steve was eager to “get off the couch” and do something positive. With support from his family, he decided to raise awareness of Meniere’s disease by riding an electric bike from Denver, Colorado to Columbus, Ohio.

The trip - 1,420 miles in all – “far exceeded my expectations,” Steve notes. “We talked about Meniere’s with at least 25 people every day. I met three people who have it – that was a first.” Steve and brother-in-law Garth Walker reached another goal, too, raising over $10,000 through the GoFundMe page On the VertiGO. Steve donated over $5,000 to the American Hearing Research Foundation, and gave a similar amount to Deaf to Menieres, a patient advocacy organization based in the UK.

People who followed the trip on social media got a taste of Steve's day-to-day Meniere's issues. He notes, “You just don't get off the couch after three years and ride 1,400 miles without thinking about managing your symptoms.” For instance, “After three days I realized I could go from 1,500 mg of salt to 2,000 mg. It meant an extra handful of Fritos at the end of the day.”

Tinnitus was his biggest concern on the trip: “I just never got a rest from it.” On Day 15 followers witnessed Steve’s only Meniere's vertigo episode, when the support team found him curled up in a ball in a rural Illinois parking lot. Then it was rest, recovery, keep going.

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AHRF awards $75,000 Birtman Grant

For 2021, AHRF has chosen to award its prestigious $75,000 Birtman Grant to Jennifer Krizman, PhD, a Research Assistant Professor at Northwestern University’s Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders. The grant will be used to support Krizman’s study, Identifying the auditory mechanisms supporting speech-in-noise and accented-speech recognition in middle-aged listeners with and without sensorineural hearing loss. Only one such award is being made in 2021. Read more on page four.

AHRF will fund an additional six studies in 2021, for a grand total of $301,000. Grant recipients will explore the therapeutic effect of combining hypothermia with medication to treat noise-induced hearing loss, inflammation’s effect in the inner ear, the role of specific inner ear cells with Meniere’s disease, and an online protocol to understand cochlear implant users’ everyday experience with speech recognition. Award recipients are listed on page two. Congratulations!
AHRF Funds Seven Projects in 2021

The following investigators have received research grants from AHRF in 2021.

**Birtman Grant - $75,000**

- Jennifer Krizman, PhD; Research Assistant Professor, Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders; Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois; *Identifying the auditory mechanisms supporting speech-in-noise and accented-speech recognition in middle-aged listeners with and without sensorineural hearing loss*

**AHRF Regular Grants (up to $50,000)**

- Suhrud Rajguru, PhD; Associate Professor, Departments of Biomedical Engineering and Otolaryngology; University of Miami, Miami, Florida; *Combinatorial therapy for preventing noise-induced cochlear synaptopathy and hearing loss*

- Justine Renauld, PhD; Postdoctoral Scholar, Department of Otolaryngology; Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio; *Understanding the role of pigmented cells in Meniere’s disease*

- Dwayne Simmons, PhD, Professor and Chair, Department of Biology; Bob Kane, PhD, Professor, Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry; Baylor University, Waco, Texas; Major Mostafa Ahmed, MD, Otolaryngologist, Carl R Darnall Army Medical Center, Ft. Hood, Texas; *Mitigating Noise-Induced Inflammatory Responses in the Inner Ear*

- Terrin Tamati, PhD; Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Otolaryngology; The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio; *Investigating the Impact of Social Networks on Speech Recognition Outcomes and Quality of Life in Adults with Cochlear Implants – A Study Using an Online Testing Protocol*

- Kathleen T. Yee, PhD; Assistant Professor, Department of Neurobiology and Anatomical Sciences; University of Mississippi Medical Center, Jackson, Mississippi; *Effects of mild traumatic brain injury on the mammalian cochlea*

**Bernard & Lottie Drazin Memorial Grant for Otolaryngology Residents ($1,000)**

- Christopher Mularczyk, MD; Resident Physician, Otolaryngology; University of Illinois at Chicago; *Temporal and Spectral Manipulation and Vocal Pitch Perception in Cochlear Implant Users*

AHRF National Honorary Board Member Barbara Chertok was featured on the cover of the Fall 2020 issue of Hearing Health magazine with a four-page article describing her advocacy, mentoring and volunteerism for people with hearing loss.

Visit [https://hearinghealthfoundation.org/hearing-health-magazine](https://hearinghealthfoundation.org/hearing-health-magazine) to read her article.
We are pleased to announce the American Hearing Research Foundation will offer these grants in 2022:

• Georgia Birtman Grant - $75,000. A one-year grant for topics related to hearing and balance disorders of the inner ear. Applicants have the option of including an alternative budget for $50,000; if the project is not chosen for the Birtman grant, it will be included in the selection for Regular grants.

• AHRF Regular Grants - $20,000 to $50,000. For topics related to hearing and balance disorders of the inner ear.

• Causes of Sudden Hearing Loss Grant – A one-year, one-time grant of up to $40,000.

• Meniere’s Disease Research Grant - $20,000 to $25,000. For studies related to Meniere’s disease causes, diagnosis, or treatment.

• Bernard and Lottie Drazin Memorial Grants - $1,000 (up to five awarded). For otolaryngology residents at specific universities.

Applications must be submitted online by 8:00am central time, Monday, August 16, 2021. Visit www.american-hearing.org for grant details and application steps.

A Note of Thanks to Our Reviewers

AHRF’s ability to fund outstanding science depends on the generosity of the scientists who give their time and expertise to review grant applications. We’d like to thank these individuals who participated in the 2021 review:

Donna Whitlon, PhD, Chair
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Pictured above: 2021 award recipient Suhrud Rajguru, (right) and team.

Recruiting...

The Columbia University Department of Psychiatry is recruiting participants for a study that aims to determine whether treating hearing loss is helpful for depression over and above the known effects of antidepressants. Participants must be age 60 or older, have moderate to severe hearing loss, and have low mood or feelings of isolation. To learn more, visit https://www.columbiapsychiatry.org/join-study/research-clinics/clinic-aging-anxiety-and-mood-disorders-caam/studies-hearing-impairment. Call 646-774-8677 or email CAAMlab@nyspi.columbia.edu for a free screening to determine your eligibility.
The day AHRF spoke with Jennifer Krizman, her dog enthusiastically announced the postal carrier. Krizman laughed apologetically at the real life example of listening in noise.

Listening in noise is a key part of the study she’ll undertake in 2021, titled Identifying the auditory mechanisms supporting speech-in-noise and accented-speech recognition in middle-aged listeners with and without sensorineural hearing loss.

Krizman explains, “With communication, we tend to focus on how well we speak. We also need to think about how well we listen.” Krizman’s study will look for separate and shared mechanisms that enable a listener to recognize and understand speech with environmental noise and non-native talking.

Krizman points out how accented speech is part of everyday life, whether in our neighborhoods or with colleagues working across scientific fields. There are 378 million people who speak English as their first language, and 743 million who speak English as their second language.

Krizman explains, “We know from prior work that the fundamental frequency or pitch matters with speech in noise. It provides a steady cue for a listener to follow through the noise. We’ll look for mechanisms that allow some people to adapt more readily to non-native speakers – for instance, pitch or harmonic discrimination.”

Ultimately, Krizman would like to explore the mechanisms that support speech recognition for listeners across a wide age span, from various backgrounds, and explore the impact of factors such as hearing acuity, music training, bilingualism, and demographics.

Krizman came into the world of bilingualism when she joined Nina Kraus’ Auditory Neuroscience Lab at Northwestern University. The lab was working on a study that tracked music training with academic progress among a group of Chicago Public School (CPS) students, many of whom come from bilingual homes. “The bilingual kids sometimes struggled to understand English in noise. But because they were in a more challenging listening environment every day, their brains were getting more exercise. We found enhanced brain responses to sound, with more active executive function and inhibitory control. These brain enhancements persisted as we followed this group over four years.”

This prompted Krizman to want to look at bilingualism from another direction – the impact non-native speech has on a listener. She notes, “We need to concentrate harder to understand non-native speech, which can lead to a negative experience.” She’d like to help people tailor their listening strategies, “so accents and noise become less difficult, and ease the burden that non-native speakers feel when trying to communicate.”

During the pandemic, Krizman and her husband often visit the Chicago Botanical Garden and Skokie Lagoons with dog, nieces, and nephews in tow. Krizman also has rediscovered her love of baking. “That flour shortage in March? Part of that was me.”

About the Birtman Grant

This grant honors Georgia Birtman, a school teacher with a hearing impairment, who bequeathed $2.1 million to AHRF in 1991.
ASHLEY KITA, MD, is a physician and assistant professor-in-residence in UCLA’s Department of Head and Neck Surgery. She studied engineering at UC Berkeley and has been fascinated with translating engineering tools to powerful clinical applications ever since.

During her residency, she teamed up with UCLA colleagues Johnny Saldate, PhD, and Larry Hoffman, PhD, to secure a 2019 grant from the American Hearing Research Foundation. Dr. Saldate’s neurobiology training and experience in the use and interpretation of cell culture models complemented Dr. Kita’s medical and engineering perspective. The collaboration between Dr. Kita and Dr. Hoffman helped to develop an approach for designing and screening topical therapeutics for inner ear injury.

A team of senior bioengineering undergraduates chose to work on this study as part of their senior project. At their Senior Symposium, this team placed second among approximately 20 other senior teams judged by bioengineering faculty and graduate students. This has sparked curiosity for other applications and has captured the interest of two current Head and Neck Surgery resident physicians who will be working on related investigations.

Kita explained, “We hope to diminish devastating side effects that oftentimes accompany chemotherapy.” Kita and her team used the AHRF funding to develop a biocompatible implant that would deliver targeted therapeutics to the inner ear to preserve hearing and balance in individuals undergoing chemotherapy.

Kita and co-authors Saldate, Hoffman, and others from UCLA published study results in the October 2020 issue of The Laryngoscope. As Otolaryngology Head and Neck Surgery, in the article *Implantable Drug Reservoir Devices for Inner Ear Delivery of Pharmacotherapeutics*. Kita reported these highlights to AHRF:

- Although chemotherapy is a powerful treatment modality for individuals with a variety of cancers, it often has the undesired side effect of irreversibly damaging the inner ear organs responsible for hearing and balance. The study aimed to develop a novel method to deliver prolonged otoprotective medication to the inner ear to protect from the damaging effects of cisplatin.
- Systemic and topical therapeutics don’t help – for instance, they can’t be concentrated locally, or they inhibit the cancer treatment. New gel treatments for the inner ear are being developed, but so far this delivery method doesn’t release therapeutic doses for the duration of the chemotherapy cycle.
- Kita’s team created its drug-releasing device by electrospinning scaffolds from a metformin and poly-L-lactic acid (PLA) solution. Electrospinning is a method of creating porous scaffolds with electric current to print charged fibers from solution onto a surface.
- The 3-D printed scaffolds were able to elute metformin for up to eight weeks in vitro. These findings demonstrate that elution of high concentrations of medication for prolonged periods of time is feasible.
- Unfortunately, metformin did not exhibit protective efficacy in this model using SH-Sy5y cells. However, the study resulted in a high-throughput method of...
Residents in otolaryngology programs must conduct medical research, usually during their third or fourth year of residency. AHRF offers the Bernard and Lottie Drazin Memorial Grant Program to fund up to five residency research projects each year. The Foundation hopes to nurture the development of potential clinician-scientists. Here, three 2020 award recipients discuss their work.

Matthew Maksimoski is a resident at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine.

What led you to otolaryngology? I’ve always been interested in surgery plus the medical management of patients. I like the way I can follow patients over the course of their hearing problems and help them adapt over time, and intervene with surgery when it makes sense.

Tell us about your research study. I’m investigating the long-term impact on hearing when gamma knife radiosurgery is used to treat vestibulocochlear nerve schwannomas. This was a novel treatment in the 1980s, when the field switched to radiation to deal with cancerous tumors. In the 1990s, we began using radiation to treat benign schwannomas. We’ve encountered patients who had great hearing after the treatment. But for some, now hearing is worse than expected in the radiated ear.

Usually you do prospective studies because you can control the variables. But in this case each person provides their own “control” – we can compare hearing test results over the years from the side that received the treatment and the side that did not. In our subjects we’re seeing a bigger-than-expected drop in hearing in the radiated ear five to 10 years out that was not due to aging. We can offer this information to patients to make better choices.

What do you find challenging about this work? At Northwestern we see a lot of complex cases. Hearing loss or vestibular issues might be just one aspect of a person’s medical condition. Sometimes the mental effort to problem solve and troubleshoot complex medical situations can be exhausting. But I enjoy helping to improve the lives of my patients.

Cody Jeu is a resident at the University of Illinois College of Medicine. His weeks include a mix of surgery and clinical care, with rotations at the VA hospital, Stroger Hospital of Cook County, and in private practice.

"I get to help with many different patients and problems," notes Dr. Jeu. “Patients can range from a healthy person with a simple issue to someone with limited access to care whose problem has become quite complex and severe. I enjoy the diversity, but recognize that some people are in very tough situations.”
Why otolaryngology? I was interested in surgery in general. In otolaryngology – although there’s not a lot of real estate from the shoulders on up – there are so many different types of surgeries we get involved with. Our work has to do with all the senses except vision...hearing, taste, smell, and physical sensation. The potential for diverse work was exciting.

And your research study? We’re trying to see if we can develop a better way to program cochlear implants in both ears. Now when surgeons fit a second CI, it’s programmed as an individual piece of equipment. We’ve found that patients don’t get as big a boost in their hearing from the second CI compared to when the first CI usage begins. We’re trying to build a better way to implant, through new programming methods.

How has COVID affected your work? Every day we’re in noses and mouths. My face is no stranger to an N-95 face mask.

In spring 2020, we were just about to finalize the testing process for the study and found we couldn’t recruit patients due to COVID. Since then, we got an alternative approach approved, and have added specific protections for the patient and staff.

It’s been interesting to find out how much legwork it takes to get a study off the ground. There’s sourcing – identifying the products and suppliers to use, creating the protocol where you try to plan for all possibilities and have a map of how the project will proceed, and getting all approved by the IRB (Internal Review Board). Analyzing the data will be the shortest part of the project.

Stefania Goncalves is the first T32-research track resident at the University of Miami, Miller School of Medicine. “I was born and raised in Venezuela in a household of Portuguese immigrants who raised me with high core values and the importance of dedication and hard work.” Before starting residency, she held a Research Fellow position at the University of Miami where she took the lead on different otology-related research projects.

What led you to otolaryngology? The balance between medical and surgical management of diverse pathologies of the head and neck was one of the main motivators that pulled me into otolaryngology. Furthermore, the marvelous complexity of the inner ear allowing people to communicate and dance, as well as its surgical approaches, were the discovery of a new and exciting world to me.

Tell us about your research. The aim of my research is to understand how laminin can guide neurite outgrowth of spiral ganglion neurons and Schwann cells towards a laminin-coated electrode. The work can potentially improve the performance of cochlear implants and, therefore, patient outcomes. We are currently testing laminin, an extracellular matrix protein, and integrin receptor blockers, to understand laminin’s influence on Schwann cells and neurons.

How has your work been affected by COVID? Certainly, COVID has significantly delayed my work and my research study. It mainly delayed its start, the delivery of purchased materials, and has limited the work that can be done in a core lab due to in-person working restrictions.

What do you enjoy about your work, and find challenging? I love the idea of contributing to current technologies to improve patients’ quality of life while influencing the cochlear microenvironment. The most challenging aspect of my project is trying to identify the cellular pathway that plays the most important role in my pursuit.

“Research allows me to help others beyond just the patients I’m seeing in clinic.”

– Matt Maksimoska

screening their protection against cisplatin’s effects in SH-Sy5y cells and for comparing the bioactivity of eluted medications.

Jack Muldoon, my friend of 73 years, died May 15, 2020. He served as a Director on the American Hearing Research Foundation for 35 years, and chaired the Investment Committee for much of that time. Largely due to his financial advice, AHRF has successfully stewarded the gifts of its generous benefactors. In 2022, AHRF will offer $325,000 in grants to support promising research for hearing and balance disorders.

Jack was a valued volunteer for over a dozen industry and community organizations. He spent countless hours at the Arlington Heights (Illinois) Senior Center and the Arlington Heights Public Library, and conducted many classes on investments and financial matters at these locations. He received many service awards for his volunteer efforts, including the President’s Volunteer Call to Service Award in 2011.

Thank you, Jack. Your friend, Richard G. Muench

Over-the-Counter Hearing Aid Update

In 2017, Congress passed the Over-the-Counter (OTC) Hearing Aid Act. The law defined the newly created category of OTC hearing aids as devices using air conduction and/or wireless air conduction to improve hearing among adults with “perceived mild to moderate hearing impairment.”

To ensure safety and effectiveness, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was charged with developing functional guidelines, labeling and marketing standards, and conditions of sale.

The March 2021 Harvard Health Letter notes these guidelines are “are still tied up in red tape.” To provide guidance, the online Harvard publication turned to Kevin Franck, who was until recently the Director of Audiology at Harvard-affiliated Massachusetts Eye and Ear.

To read Franck’s comments about pitfalls, and important features to look for, visit https://www.health.harvard.edu/diseases-and-conditions/over-the-counter-hearing-aids-are-they-ready-yet For instance, “Franck suggests personal sound amplification products (PSAPs) with easy-to-use controls and apps, customer service to help you figure out how to operate the devices, and a money-back guarantee with a 60-day return window.”
SUPPORT MENIERE’S DISEASE RESEARCH

Did you know you can direct your donations to the American Hearing Research Foundation specifically to Meniere’s disease research? AHRF funded two Meniere’s projects in 2020, and one in 2021.

Since 2014, AHRF has partnered with attorney and caring advocate Katie Mertz to encourage research on this topic. Through her initiative run because, Mertz has completed half-marathons in 27 states, over half of her goal of 51 (one in every state plus D.C.). She’s talked and raised funds along the way – over $45,000 to date. Last August, Mertz and her father Rich Mayer hosted the second annual (and COVID-safe) golf benefit in Hartland, Wisconsin. Their inspiration? Kim Mayer, Katie’s mother, who suffers with Meniere’s. You can follow Katie’s progress at www.facebook.com/runbecause. Donations for Meniere’s research can be made via the AHRF website.

Steve Schweir’s Meniere’s adventure raised more than awareness. Executive Director Joan Wincentsen (pictured) displays $5,165 in checks AHRF received for Meniere’s disease research that came from Steve’s efforts.

Biking to Beat Meniere’s
(Continued from p.1)

Steve enjoyed seeing social media followers posting about their own goals. He notes, “I’m not an advocate of exercise. I hate it. But what I would like to inspire people to do is just find something you lost due to this disease, whether it’s painting, walking your dog, or just taking a car ride for pleasure. We all want our old lives back. But if you can find one thing you love that was stolen by this disease, go after it. Riding a bike that was just my platform. Get out there and do something good.”

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Thanks, Steve!
You Can Fuel New Discoveries
Suhrud Rajguru, PhD, Associate Professor,
University of Miami

“I am beyond excited to receive this support from AHRF and what it will mean for research on developing a therapy for noise-induced hearing loss.”

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Many companies support employee philanthropy by offering matching gift programs. By taking advantage of corporate matching, you can maximize the value of your gift at no additional cost. If your employer needs information about AHRF’s 501(c)(3) tax status, contact info@american-hearing.org.

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Many federal and state employees choose to give to AHRF via the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC), the largest workplace giving program in the world. AHRF is on the CFC National List, Our CFC number is 10571.

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Donor Advised Funds (DAFs) allow you to combine the most favorable tax benefits with the flexibility to support your preferred causes. You can support meaningful hearing and balance research by recommending a grant to the American Hearing Research Foundation directly from your DAF. Examples of DAFs are the Fidelity Investments Charitable Gift Fund, Schwab Fund for Charitable Giving, and Vanguard Charitable Endowment Program.

YOUR LEGACY
One important way you can help find hearing and balance solutions for years to come is by including the American Hearing Research Foundation in your will. Whether you bequeath a specific dollar amount or a percentage of your estate, your legacy will be dedicated to finding answers to hearing loss and balance disorders for future generations. A qualified financial planner can guide your decision and help you consider tax consequences.
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General Funds sustain the core programs central to the Foundation’s mission. Donations to the General Fund also can be restricted to use for research into certain areas such as Meniere’s disease.

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