VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

VCU MASSEY CANCER CENTER

Darlene Brunzell named program leader of Cancer Prevention and Control

Brunzell is a nicotine dependence expert

Darlene Brunzell, Ph.D., has been appointed the co-leader of the Cancer Prevention and Control (CPC) research program at VCU Massey Cancer Center. She will serve in this capacity alongside Jennifer Elston Lafata, Ph.D., who has co-led the program since 2010.

As co-leader of CPC, Brunzell will serve on the cancer center's senior leadership team and will help develop and guide the strategic direction of the CPC program. She will focus on opportunities to grow Massey's CPC membership, foster transdisciplinary collaborations among the program and increase its funding base.

The Cancer Prevention and Control (CPC) program consists of behavioral and health services scientists, basic science researchers and various types of clinicians who study behavioral, policy, organizational, and environmental factors that affect cancer risk, diagnosis, treatment and survival. The program is focused on the entire cancer continuum, from prevention to end of life. Massey's CPC research is especially renowned nationwide for its work on underserved minority populations.

"With Dr. Brunzell's valuable expertise, fresh ideas and commitment, I am confident that her role as co-leader will strengthen our Cancer Prevention and Control program," said Gordon D. Ginder, M.D., director of VCU Massey Cancer Center.

"I look forward to the opportunity to help lead this nationally recognized research program and to collaborate with Massey scientists to advance cancer prevention and control research," Brunzell said.

Brunzell is a research member in Massey's CPC program and an associate professor in the VCU Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology. She also is a member of VCU's NIH Tobacco Center of Regulatory Science, the VCU Alcohol Research Center, the Central Virginia Center on Drug Abuse Research and the Interdisciplinary Neuroscience Graduate Program in the School of Medicine.

Brunzell's research interests are focused on multidisciplinary approaches to decrease cancer risk. An expert in nicotine dependence and nicotinic acetylcholine receptor function, Brunzell has conducted molecular, neurochemical and behavioral studies that have identified novel targets and strategies for treatment of tobacco dependence. She has published more than 30 articles in peer-reviewed journals, administered over seven grants as a principal investigator and contributed to more than nine NIH-sponsored research projects. She filed provisional patents for a novel tobacco cessation therapy that reduces motivation to self-administer nicotine. Brunzell received a grant from the NIH National Center for Advancement of Translational Science to pursue this approach clinically. Her preclinical studies have advanced to phase 2 clinical trials at the University of Pittsburgh, where her colleagues are assessing the ability of this approach to help smokers quit. In addition to her interest in high-risk populations for smoking-related illness, such as the mentally ill, Brunzell's work also focuses on the impact that age and sex differences have on vulnerability to addiction behaviors that impact cancer risk. She co-discovered that voluntary exercise may be a highly effective prevention and intervention strategy for nicotine use in adolescents. Additionally, she received a grant from the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) to support her research exploring nicotinic receptor contributions to behaviors that foster vulnerability to tobacco use and relapse.

Brunzell earned a Ph.D. in neuroscience and behavior from the University of Massachusetts and served postdoctoral fellowships in psychology and psychiatry at Yale University, where she was promoted to research faculty in the Division of Molecular Psychiatry. She also holds a B.A. in psychology and communications from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.