Damian McNamara
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Dr. Robert Kirsner Recognized with American Skin Association's First Translational Research Award

Years of combining basic and clinical research in wound healing has resulted in the American Skin Association (ASA) giving its first-ever research award for bridging these two areas.

The ASA chose Robert Kirsner, M.D., Ph.D., Harvey Blank Professor and Chair of the Dr. Phillip Frost Department of Dermatology and Cutaneous Surgery at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, as the recipient of its inaugural translational research award.

Dr. Robert Kirsner

“I was thrilled,” Dr. Kirsner said. The award brings greater awareness to patients with chronic wounds who are “a neglected population that is often marginalized because they are older and debilitated by vascular disease or diabetes.”

The recognition is for a body of work dating back to the early 1990s for Dr. Kirsner and colleagues.

Sharing the spotlight

“The award highlights all the people I’ve worked with over the years to help advance wound healing,” he said, citing his career mentors and early career colleagues William Eaglstein, M.D., Vincent Falanga, M.D., and Francisco Kerdel, M.D., as well as current colleagues Marjana Tomic-Canic, Ph.D., Irena Pastar, Ph.D., Dragana Ajdic, Ph.D., Ivan Jozic, Ph.D., and

Hadar Lev Tov, M.D.

All of his colleagues and collaborators “should be proud of how they have advanced the care of patients with wounds and making people’s lives better,” he said.

The Department of Dermatology and Cutaneous Surgery is the foremost department in the country, regardless of specialty, in wound healing research, Dr. Kirsner said. The comprehensive scope of wound research at the University of Miami and the UM Wound Center includes evaluation of cells, and small and large animals, as well as tissue samples taken from patients with challenging wound issues.

Unlike many other institutions that focus on either basic laboratory research or clinical research and care, Dr. Kirsner’s team and his department bridge both worlds. The ASA award for translational research recognizes the importance of this essential group of researchers who apply what they learn in the lab to helping patients. They also assess the impact of new therapies on patients, which informs further research advances.

Synergistic research

“The things we learn from those models we can apply to the patients, and then bring them back to the lab and study them further,” Dr. Kirsner said. “It’s really a fantastic synergy.”

For example, in the early 1990s, UM treated the very first patients with what was then a new technology of engineered skin – a treatment that is now used widely. Subsequent research has found that when this technology is applied to a

non-healing chronic wound it changes the cell signaling that prevents some wounds from closing efficiently. That discovery combined technology designed for patient care with findings from basic research. Combining the two has further advanced therapy that can make a difference for patients. All of this research was done, at least in some large part, at UM, Dr. Kirsner said.

Still, combining advances in research and clinical care is not without its challenges.

“I often get asked, ‘Why are you interested in wounds? It’s such a hard area,’” Dr. Kirsner said. “That’s one of the things we like about it – it is hard.” As wound healing cuts across multiple specialties, “it touches on a lot of different aspects of medicine, including various aspects of surgery, rehabilitation and aging. Because it’s hard, it’s also very rewarding.”

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