

Dr. Tatjana Rundek Awarded the Evelyn F. McKnight Endowed Chair for Learning and Memory in Aging

At a ceremony before many of the nation's most prominent neurologists, renowned researcher, epidemiologist, mentor, and educator Tatjana Rundek, M.D., Ph.D., formally became the holder of the Evelyn F. McKnight Endowed Chair for Learning and Memory in Aging.

Dr. Rundek, who is also the scientific director of the Evelyn F. McKnight Brain Institute (MBI) at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, said she is excited to lead the dedicated team of physician-scientists who are committed to understanding how aging influences memory.

"I am dedicated to the McKnight Brain Research Foundation [MBRF] mission of improving cognitive brain health," said Dr. Rundek, professor of neurology and public health, executive vice chair of research and faculty affairs, director of the Clinical Translational Research Division in Neurology, and director of the Master of Science degree program in clinical translational investigations. "I see myself as a catalyst, along with the MBI team, to advance our innovative research and educational programs."



Back row, from left: Michael Dockery, M.D., Madhav Thambisetty, M.D., Ph.D., Richard Isaacson, M.D., Gene Ryerson, M.D., and Amy Porter. Front row: Dean Henri R. Ford, M.D., MHA, Ralph Sacco, M.D., MS, Tatjana Rundek, M.D., Ph.D., Lee Dockery, M.D., Melanie Cianciotto, President Julio Frenk

One of just four McKnight Institutes nationwide, MBI was established in 2002 with a generous donation from the MBRF and a match from the Bernard and Alexandria Schoninger Foundation and other UM

donors to investigate and treat age-related cognitive decline.

Through an additional gift, MBRF then established the Evelyn F. McKnight Endowed Chair for Learning and Memory in Aging to support the scientific director of the institute, providing them the freedom to further their research in the field.

“Today’s installation is a well-deserved honor for Dr. Rundek and stands as a testament to the generosity of the Evelyn F. McKnight Brain Research Foundation,” said University of Miami President Julio Frenk. “We are so appreciative of their extraordinary philanthropy.”

“An endowed chair is one of the highest academic honors that we can confer on a faculty member,” said Henri R. Ford, M.D., MHA, dean and chief academic officer of the Miller School. “It is a tribute to the faculty member’s achievements and our sincere and utmost confidence that this individual is going to continue on a path of excellence.”

Evelyn F. McKnight was a nurse who established the McKnight Brain Research Foundation in 1999. She and her late husband, William, were interested in the effects of aging on memory. That interest inspired her to establish a legacy of support for research of the brain to alleviate the influence of age-related memory loss.

J. Lee Dockery, M.D., chair of the board of trustees of MBRF, said Mrs. McKnight would have been delighted with Dr. Rundek’s appointment as chair holder.

“Mrs. McKnight was a great champion of women and had a very successful career as a nurse, serving as a captain in the United States Air Force and as a Nurse in United States Congress —she created great things,” Dr. Dockery said. “Dr. Rundek would have certainly been her choice to take on this challenge.”

Born and raised in Zagreb, Croatia, Dr. Rundek received her medical degree and neurology training at the University of Zagreb, earned a Ph.D. in neuroscience in Germany, and completed a research fellowship at Columbia University.

She was the first Fulbright Scholar at the Neurological Institute of New York and, as the International Fulbright Scholar Leader in 1996-97, she gave a presentation on the importance of the international research exchange program at the United Nations Assembly in New York.

A dedicated scientist, Dr. Rundek’s professional and scientific interests include genetic, epigenetic, and environmental contributions to cerebral small vessel disease, stroke, and cognitive decline, with a specific focus on health disparities in women and minority populations.

She is the principal investigator of several R01 grants and foundation awards funded by the National Institutes of Health/National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NIH/NINDS). She received an NINDS K24 training grant and research awards from the Hazel K. Goddess Fund for Stroke Research in

Women and the Dr. Gilbert Baum Fund in Clinical Ultrasound for best clinical application of ultrasound in investigations of brain hemodynamics.

Dr. Rundek serves on review study sections at the NIH, the American Heart Association, and the American Academy of Neurology, and she is on the editorial boards of many scientific journals. She has more than 360 publications to her name.

Her current investigations involve the cerebrovascular mechanisms of successful aging, mild cognitive impairment, and dementia using magnetic resonance imaging and transcranial Doppler challenge testing, in collaborations with the Einstein Aging Study in the Bronx, the Northern Manhattan Study, and other McKnight Brain Institutes at University of Arizona and University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Ralph L. Sacco, M.D., MS, professor and chair of the Department of Neurology, has been Dr. Rundek's colleague for 20 years. He said she embodies a commitment to excellence that is critical to the department's success.

"Thanks to her innovation, her insight, and her collaboration, Tatjana truly embraces team science," said Dr. Sacco, who is also the Olemberg Family Chair in Neurological Disorders and executive director of the institute. "She does it with grace and in a way that makes everyone feel a part of the team."

While accepting the honor, Dr. Rundek thanked those who spoke on her behalf, as well as members of MBRF, her research team, and collaborators.

"I like to say, 'If you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go far, go together.' This has been my motto," Dr. Rundek said. "I look forward to working with all to do great things."