

Four Researchers Honored by the Batchelor Foundation

The 14th presentation of the Micah Batchelor Awards for Excellence in Children's Health Research, created to recognize and inspire the development of innovative ideas and solutions to improve the health and well-being of children, took place November 8. Four researchers from Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center and the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine were honored at the ceremony.



At the Micah Batchelor Awards ceremony, from left, Henri R. Ford, M.D, MHA, Brent Pfeiffer, M.D., Ph.D., Merline Benny, M.D., Juan Solano, M.D., Asha Pillai, M.D., Judy Schaechter, M.D., MBA, and President Julio Frenk. (Photo by Mitchell Zachs)

Asha Pillai, M.D., a Sylvester researcher who is nationally known for her expertise in pediatric stem cell transplantation and immunotherapy, was named the 2018 recipient of the Micah Batchelor Award for Excellence in Children's Health Research.

"I would like to thank the Batchelor family and my extended UM family most sincerely," said Dr. Pillai, associate professor in the Division of Pediatric Hematology/Oncology, deputy director of translational research for the Department of Pediatrics, and associate professor in the Department of Microbiology and Immunology. "I feel very privileged to be here tonight to accept this honor. The ongoing support of the Batchelor Foundation will ensure we can extend early curative stem cell transplants to children and young adults with sickle cell disease and other non-malignant blood disorders."

The ceremony also honored Brent Pfeiffer, M.D., Ph.D., as the recipient of the Micah Batchelor Fellows Award, and Merline Benny, M.D., and Juan Solano, M.D., as the recipients of the Micah Batchelor Scholar Award, which honors early-career faculty who are exploring innovative research ideas.

Henri R. Ford, M.D., MHA, dean and chief academic officer of the Miller School, called the ceremony a "momentous occasion" to celebrate the accomplishments of faculty members.

"I would like to express my profound gratitude to the Batchelor Foundation for their enduring commitment to the University of Miami and the Miller School," Dr. Ford said. "The extraordinary gifts they have made over the years have supported fundamental discoveries that we hope will lead to interventions that cure pediatric illnesses."

The Batchelor Foundation is one of the University of Miami's largest donors. Thanks to its generosity, the Batchelor Children's Research Institute, where the awards ceremony was held, was dedicated in 2001.

It was at that dedication that the late George E. Batchelor, a renowned aviation pioneer and philanthropist, made a surprise announcement of an additional \$5 million gift to establish the annual Micah Batchelor Award for Excellence in Children's Health Research in memory of his grandson, Micah.

The Foundation committed an additional \$5 million in 2014 to expand the number of research awards and to encourage young investigators in their careers.

"We are so appreciative of the support of the Batchelor Foundation, because these awards celebrate the best of the human spirit as they are the conjunction of talent and generosity," said University of Miami President Julio Frenk. "It is remarkable to have an endowment that year after year allows a department to recognize both established and young investigators, reward their work, and financially support their continuing investigation in critical areas of importance."

Foundation trustees Sandy Batchelor, Daniel Ferraresi, Jack Falk, and Jon Batchelor, who is also a University of Miami trustee, and his wife Nancy Batchelor, attended the ceremony, along with Jon's son, Christopher, and Micah's brother, George Steven.

Dr. Pillai completed her B.S. in microbiology and immunology from Stanford University and residencies in medicine and

pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine. She developed the first double-fellowship in pediatric and adult hematology/oncology and stem cell transplantation at Stanford, where she made seminal discoveries in the role of innate immunity in transplantation.

Funded by a National Research Service Award from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and subsequently by K08 Career Development awards from the NIH, Dr. Pillai began her laboratory program in 2009 at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, where she secured continuous competitive funding, including a V Foundation Scholar Award and R56 awards from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute of the NIH.

At the ceremony, Dr. Pillai spoke about how, a few years later while considering a career move, it was a discussion with her realtor, Nancy Batchelor, that convinced her to come to the University of Miami.

"Speaking to Nancy over several interactions made me realize how dedicated the Batchelor family is to children, to transformative research in pediatrics, to this university, and to the entire cause of meaningful giving," she said. "It connected with me on so many levels, and, in the end, it is what made me decide to come to Miami."

Since their arrival at the University of Miami in 2016, Dr. Pillai and her research team have devised novel methods to optimize SCT techniques through innate immunity, alloregulation, and immune tolerance. They are currently fine-tuning a regimen they developed to optimize a process called "bidirectional tolerance," which promises an innovative new way to conduct stem cell transplants between mismatched donors

and recipients.

Though sickle cell disease is curable with an early transplant, patients with different racial and ethnic backgrounds have a harder time finding a donor match because of the disparities in the donor registries. Through their work, Dr. Pillai and team are hoping to change those odds.

“We have spent many years developing the preclinical data in my laboratory program and are now looking forward to moving ahead with clinical trials to cure sickle cell anemia and many other non-cancerous blood conditions early in childhood through maternally derived SCT,” Dr. Pillai said. “I feel that we are uniquely positioned in Miami to do something that is internationally relevant, given the outstanding nationally recognized work of my colleagues, Drs. Ofelia Alvarez and Tom Harrington in the UM Sickle Disease Center of Excellence, and the mentorship of Dr. Danny Armstrong, who is already well-established in the field of optimizing outcomes for sickle cell disease.”

Dr. Pfeiffer, the Fellows Award winner, is assistant professor of clinical pediatrics in the Division of Pediatric Critical Care in the Department of Pediatrics. He received his bachelor’s degree in biology and chemistry from the University of Evansville, Indiana, and his medical degree and doctorate of philosophy in biochemistry from the University of Missouri-Columbia, Missouri.

Dr. Pfeiffer joined the University of Miami faculty in 2011, after completing his residency in pediatrics in 2006, followed by subspecialty training in pediatric critical care. His clinical duties include the support of critically ill children

in the pediatric intensive care and cardiac intensive care units at Holtz Children's Hospital at the University of Miami/Jackson Memorial Hospital.

Dr. Pfeiffer's non-clinical duties focus on research endeavors in the field of immunology, specifically solid organ transplantation medicine. His research efforts have led to three peer-reviewed publications in *Blood*, *Biology of Blood and Marrow Transplantation*, and *Journal of Clinical Immunology Insight*.

Dr. Benny, a Scholar Award winner, is assistant professor of pediatrics in the Division of Neonatology at the Miller School. She earned her medical degree at TD Medical College in Kerala, India and then taught at her alma mater for two years before moving to the United States.

Dr. Benny completed her pediatric residency at Kansas University Medical Center and her neonatology fellowship at Women and Infants Hospital at Brown University. During her training, she developed a strong interest in research and decided to pursue a career as physician-scientist.

She has been actively involved in research at the Batchelor Institute Perinatology Laboratory, and has a particular interest in the field of stem cell research and adult outcomes of neonatal morbidities.

Dr. Solano, also a Scholar Award winner, is assistant professor of clinical pediatrics in the Department of Pediatrics. He graduated from Universidad del Rosario in Bogota, Colombia, and completed a residency in pediatrics and fellowship in pediatric critical care at the University of

Miami/Jackson Memorial Hospital, as well as a fellowship in neonatal/perinatal medicine at the University of California, San Francisco.

Dr. Solano is currently the medical director of the Pediatric Mild Traumatic Brain Injury Program at the University of Miami, and a pediatric intensivist in the pediatric ICU at Holtz Children's Hospital.

Judy Schaechter, M.D., MBA, chair of the Department of Pediatrics at the Miller School, the George E. Batchelor Endowed Chair in Child Health, and chief of service at Holtz Children's Hospital, Jackson Health System, said the awards help researchers gain new knowledge through lifesaving and life-changing research, dramatically improving care for children in our community and around the world.

"We couldn't be more grateful to The Batchelor Foundation and the spirit of George Batchelor, which, through the Micah Batchelor Awards, inspires child health research," Dr. Schaechter said.