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WHAM! Issues First Investment in COVID-19 Sex and Gender Research

Dr. Nicole Waitowich will receive a WHAM! Investigators Fund grant to evaluate gender equity in COVID-19 Clinical Research.

Greenwich, CT (July 22, 2020) – The WHAM! (Women’s Health Access Matters!) Investigators Fund is funding research to evaluate emerging COVID-19 medical research for sex- and gender-inclusive practices. Dr. Nicole Waitowich, Associate Director for the Women’s Health Research Institute at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, was awarded WHAM! funding to quantify the number of COVID-19 research studies that include both men and women and analyze findings through sex and gender-based reporting as well as to identify other variables associated with sex inclusion in COVID-19 research.

“WHAM! is committed to solving one of the most intractable issues in medicine: studying and reporting how disease affects men and women differently,” said Carolee Lee, Founder and CEO of WHAM! “The economic and health implications of ignoring disparities in medical research are enormous. That’s why WHAM! is leading with private funding to ensure that we focus on and learn from how men and women experience and respond to COVID-19 differently from the start.”

This research builds upon Dr. Waitowich’s [decade-long study](#) that concluded that women are still significantly excluded in medical research. After evaluating 700 studies across nine biological research areas, Waitowich found that only 49% included both male and female subjects and only 4% provided a justification for the lack of female representation. This gross underrepresentation across the board in clinical trials and medical research hurts potential health breakthroughs that could be critical for both men and women.

This grant is the third issued by the WHAM! Investigators Fund since the launch of WHAM! in 2018. The first inaugural WHAM! grant was issued to Dr. Michelle O’Donoghue from the Mary Horrigan Connors Center for Women’s Health and Gender Biology at Brigham and Women’s Hospital at Harvard University. Dr. O’Donoghue’s research identifies novel pathways that contribute to heart disease in women. Dr. Hilary Blumberg from the Blumberg Lab at Yale University received the other WHAM! inaugural grant to examine whether sleep improvements in women lead to lower Alzheimer’s Disease and Related Dementias (ADRD) risk biomarkers.

The evidence is clear that men and women are experiencing COVID-19 differently. Men, across all age groups, ethnicities and cultures are more vulnerable to acute disease and death from COVID-19 than women. 58% of the cases are male, and the [death rate in China is between 2.8%-4.7% in men versus](#)

[1.7% - 2.8% in women](#). This difference was also true and measurable in the two previous Coronavirus outbreaks of SARS and MERS.

Dr. Voitowich's work has the potential to identify key areas of strength and weakness in experimental rigor and reproducibility within the expanding body of COVID-19-related research and establish best practices. Through this grant, Voitowich will quantify the number of COVID-19 research studies which are sex-inclusive and incorporate sex and gender into their analysis. In addition, Dr. Voitowich will also identify other variables associated with sex-inclusion and sex- and gender-based analysis in COVID-19 research, such as biomedical discipline, author gender, and country-of-origin.

"Attention to sex and gender differences for COVID-19 risks, trajectories and outcomes from the start of this pandemic will produce a more valuable and complete evidence-base" [noted Chloe E. Bird](#), Chair of the Diversity and Inclusion Forum at the RAND Corporation. "The alternative is to follow the limited path of prior clinical research—late consideration of the potential for differences, allowing mistaken and potentially deadly misunderstandings based on one-size fits all assumptions that ignore significant social and biological differences that shape men's and women's outcomes."

While much of the work in the biomedical community focuses on developing breakthrough therapies and treatments for COVID-19, this work is crucial for ensuring the research community establishes a complete understanding of the disease. Dr. Voitowich's research will identify the research gaps in the study of this novel disease, particularly as it relates to sex inclusion. Her findings will be used to advocate for and promote best practices to improve COVID-19 research and ensure the therapies developed will benefit everyone. With the vast resources and attention devoted to COVID-19, Dr. Voitowich's work is imperative to guaranteeing that breakthroughs are meaningful and create positive outcomes for women patients.

About WHAM!

WHAM! is a donor-funded, non-profit organization, dedicated to improving and elevating the health of women to 21st century standards by showcasing the economic imperative of women's health research in prevention, diagnosis, treatment and outcomes. WHAM! aims to expand the scientific and clinical knowledge about health conditions that occur exclusively, predominantly and differentially in women and to translate these findings into solutions that optimize women's health. In collaboration with the RAND Corporation, WHAM! is releasing a detailed study to examine the economic consequences of the disparity in women's health research. WHAM! has four disease focus areas: autoimmune disease, brain health, cancer, and cardiovascular disease. Additional information can be found at <https://whamnow.org/>.

About Dr. Nicole Voitowich

Dr. Nicole Voitowich is the Associate Director for the Women's Health Research Institute at Northwestern University. She is actively transforming the landscape of women's health through her research, advocacy, and outreach activities. She implements programming which informs the scientific and medical communities, as well as the public, about the influences of sex and gender on health and disease. Additional information can be found [here](#).

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