Epel elected to the National Academy of Medicine

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Elissa Epel, PhD [1]

Professor of Psychiatry Elissa Epel, PhD [1], is among the 79 new members elected to the National Academy of Medicine (NAM) [2], one of the highest honors in the fields of health and medicine.

Membership in NAM recognizes individuals who have demonstrated outstanding professional achievements and commitment to service in the medical sciences, health care and public health. Other UCSF Psychiatry faculty members in this distinguished group include:

- Nancy Adler, PhD [3] (elected in 1994)
- Tom Boyce, MD [5] (2011)
- Mark von Zastrow, MD, PhD [8] (2011)

Epel is a health psychologist focusing on stress pathways. For the past 15 years, she has studied stress in the lab and in the field, using naturalistic stressors and associations with an early aging syndrome. She examines how stress processes lead to early disease precursors, focusing on overeating, abdominal obesity, and immune cell aging. She has found that people’s propensity to be stress reactive, psychologically or in terms of cortisol reactivity, is associated with overeating, abdominal obesity, and accelerated cell aging.

With UCSF colleagues Elizabeth Blackburn, PhD [9], and Jue Lin, PhD [10], she found that
stress perceptions and stress arousal are related to telomere shortness and dampened telomerase activity. Their group now collaborates with other labs extending this work from animal models to population studies to examine how stress reduction interventions may enhance functioning of the telomere/telomerase maintenance system. Early work from their studies, as well as from other research groups, shows promise in understanding biochemical and behavioral modulators of cell aging in humans.

Epel studied psychology and psychobiology at Stanford University and received her PhD in clinical and health psychology at Yale University. She completed an NIMH-funded postdoctoral fellowship at UCSF, where she has stayed on as faculty, in the Department of Psychiatry. Epel has received awards from the American Psychological Association for her research conducted as a student (1996, 1998), junior investigator (2005), and most recently, the Early Career Award (2008) as a faculty member. She also was awarded the Academy of Behavioral Medicine Research Neal Miller Young Investigator Award and the International Society for Psychoneuroendocrinology’s Young Investigator Award.

She was a founder and is now director of the UCSF Center for Obesity Assessment, Study, and Treatment (COAST) [11], an umbrella organization for clinical/translational research at UCSF focusing on the role socio-economic status and stress pathways play in the obesity epidemic. She is also director of the Aging, Metabolism, and Emotions Lab [12], which studies a range of topics surrounding how people can thrive in both mind and body under severe adversity, such as poverty, caregiving responsibilities, work-related stress, and depression.

Epel is also the Associate Director of the UCSF Center for Health and Community [13] and UCSF Nutrition Obesity Research Center (NORC) [14], as well as a faculty member in the Robert Wood Johnson Health and Society Scholar Postdoctoral Fellowship Program [19] on population health, the NIMH-funded Psychology and Medicine Postdoctoral Fellowship [16], and the UCSF Osher Center Training in Integrative Medicine (TRIM) Fellowship [17]. She is involved in several clinical trials at the UCSF Osher Center for Integrative Medicine, where she helps examine how mindfulness meditation affects stress pathways and cell aging.

Also to elected to NAM from UCSF this year were:

- Joseph L. DeRisi, PhD [18], Albert Bowers Professor in Biochemistry and Gordon M. Tomkins Professor at UCSF, and co-president of the Chan Zuckerberg Biohub
- Bruce L. Miller, MD [19], A.W. and Mary Margaret Clausen Distinguished Professor in Neurology and director of the UCSF Memory and Aging Center

New members are elected by current active members through a selective process that recognizes individuals who have made major contributions to the advancement of the medical sciences, health care, and public health. A diversity of talent among NAM’s membership is assured by its Articles of Organization, which stipulate that at least one-quarter of the membership is selected from fields outside the health professions? for example, from such fields as law, engineering, social sciences, and the humanities. The newly elected members raise NAM’s total active membership to 1,947 and the number of international members to 146.

Established originally as the Institute of Medicine in 1970 by the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Medicine addresses critical issues in health, science, medicine, and related policy and inspires positive actions across sectors. NAM works
alongside the National Academy of Sciences and National Academy of Engineering to provide independent, objective analysis and advice to the nation and conduct other activities to solve complex problems and inform public policy decisions. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine also encourage education and research, recognize outstanding contributions to knowledge, and increase public understanding. With their election, members make a commitment to volunteer their service in the Academies’ activities.

About UCSF Psychiatry

The UCSF Department of Psychiatry [20] and the Langley Porter Psychiatric Institute are among the nation’s foremost resources in the fields of child, adolescent, adult, and geriatric mental health. Together they constitute one of the largest departments in the UCSF School of Medicine and the UCSF Weill Institute for Neurosciences, with a mission focused on research (basic, translational, clinical), teaching, patient care, and public service.

UCSF Psychiatry conducts its clinical, educational, and research efforts at a variety of locations in Northern California, including UCSF campuses at Parnassus Heights, Mission Bay, and Laurel Heights, the UCSF Medical Center at Mt. Zion, Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital and Trauma Center, the San Francisco VA Health Care System, and UCSF Fresno.

About the UCSF Weill Institute for Neurosciences

The UCSF Weill Institute for Neurosciences [21], established by the extraordinary generosity of Joan and Sanford I. "Sandy" Weill, brings together world-class researchers with top-ranked physicians to solve some of the most complex challenges in the human brain.

The UCSF Weill Institute leverages UCSF’s unrivaled bench-to-bedside excellence in the neurosciences. It unites three UCSF departments?Neurology, Psychiatry, and Neurological Surgery—that are highly esteemed for both patient care and research, as well as the Neuroscience Graduate Program, a cross-disciplinary alliance of nearly 100 UCSF faculty members from 15 basic-science departments, as well as the UCSF Institute for Neurodegenerative Diseases, a multidisciplinary research center focused on finding effective treatments for Alzheimer’s disease, frontotemporal dementia, Parkinson’s disease, and other neurodegenerative disorders.

About UCSF

UC San Francisco (UCSF) [22] is a leading university dedicated to promoting health worldwide through advanced biomedical research, graduate-level education in the life sciences and health professions, and excellence in patient care. It includes top-ranked graduate schools of dentistry, medicine, nursing and pharmacy; a graduate division with nationally renowned programs in basic, biomedical, translational and population sciences; and a preeminent biomedical research enterprise. It also includes UCSF Health, which comprises two top-ranked hospitals, UCSF Medical Center and UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital San Francisco, and other partner and affiliated hospitals and healthcare providers throughout the Bay Area.

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