

VCU Faculty Make the Case for Authentic Engagement of Community in Research

RICHMOND, Va. (April 7, 2016) — Empowering community members to be stakeholders in research and health is a key focus of researchers at [Virginia Commonwealth University \(VCU\)](http://www.vcu.edu), who recently published an article on “authentic” engagement in the April 2016 theme issue of *Health Affairs* focused on patients’ use of evidence.

Arguing that including stakeholders as full partners in all aspects of designing, conducting, and interpreting research is critical to producing research that can better meet the needs of the population of interest, the article calls upon researchers in the medical field to shed misconceptions that laypeople cannot contribute meaningfully to science, or that “community engagement” means little more than recruiting patients for trials.

“Researchers often wonder how to engage the community in their trials, but we should turn the question 180 degrees,” said Steven H. Woolf, M.D., M.P.H., director of the VCU Center on Society and Health and lead author of the *Health Affairs* article. “The question is not how to engage the community in our research but how to get researchers engaged in the community’s work to improve population health.”

Citing the benefits of engaging patients and the public as full stakeholders in the design and conduct of research, the authors’ article discusses two examples from studies conducted by VCU researchers. The first study, led by the VCU Department of Family Medicine and Population Health and funded by the Patient Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI), devoted the entire first year to engaging patients and other stakeholders for input on the research methods. Woolf and his colleagues report that 46% of all comments came from patients, more than from the researchers or clinicians.

The second example cites the extensive work of the Center on Society and Health in Richmond’s East End, an economically disadvantaged neighborhood where the *Engaging Richmond* project has worked since 2011 to involve residents as partners in identifying health priorities, conducting research, and working with local government and community organizations to improve neighborhood conditions that affect health. Along with their involvement in research, the partnership has sponsored training events, raised awareness about mental health issues, sought help for residents of public housing, and advised on similar engagement efforts in other areas. The [VCU C. Kenneth and Dianne Wright Center for Clinical and Translational Research \(CCTR\)](http://www.vcu.edu) supports this work with funding from an NIH Clinical and Translational Science Award.

“Community engagement in research is critical to the mission of the CCTR,” said F. Gerard Moeller, M.D., director of the CCTR. “This work shows how VCU is working with researchers to make their research more relevant to the priorities and practices of the community.”

In conjunction with the article’s publication, Woolf was invited to present his research at a release event hosted by *Health Affairs* on April 7, 2016 in Washington, D.C. Alan Weil, editor-in-chief of *Health Affairs*, and Joe Selby, executive director of PCORI, provided opening remarks. The article from VCU is entitled “Authentic Engagement Of Patients And Communities Can Transform Research, Practice, And Policy.

To read the full article, visit www.healthaffairs.org.

To read more about Engaging Richmond, visit [societyhealth.vcu.edu/work/the-projects/engaging-richmond]

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About VCU and VCU Health

Virginia Commonwealth University is a major, urban public research university with national and international rankings in sponsored research. Located in downtown Richmond, VCU enrolls more than 31,000 students in 225 degree and certificate programs in the arts, sciences and humanities. Seventy-nine of the programs are unique in Virginia, many of them crossing the disciplines of VCU’s 13 schools and one college. The only academic medical center and Level I trauma center in the region, VCU Health comprises five health sciences schools (Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy), VCU Medical Center, Community Memorial Hospital, Children’s Hospital of Richmond at VCU, VCU Massey Cancer Center and Virginia Premier. For more, please visit www.vcu.edu and vcuhealth.org.