

From the University of Mississippi Medical Center Division of Public Affairs

AFTER 15 YEARS, JACKSON HEART STUDY LEADER TO STEP AWAY

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JACKSON, Miss. – The pioneering researcher who has led the Jackson Heart Study for the past decade and a half, Dr. Herman Taylor, plans to step down as director and principal investigator effective Nov. 18. Taylor will continue as an in-house consultant to the JHS through June of next year.

The Jackson Heart Study, with funding from the National Institutes of Health, is a broad-based collaboration among Jackson State University, Tougaloo College and the University of Mississippi Medical Center. The study is renowned for its important scientific findings about the risk factors for cardiovascular disease in African-Americans.

Dr. James E. Keeton, UMMC vice chancellor for health affairs and dean of the School of Medicine, said Taylor has provided dynamic and steadfast leadership from the outset of the study.

"Under Dr. Taylor's guidance the project grew from a newly christened start-up to a well-regarded and groundbreaking study with an international network of collaborators," Keeton said. "I am grateful he has agreed to remain associated with the JHS as a consultant through the current academic year, smoothing the transition to new leadership."

Taylor, the Shirley Professor for Health Disparities in the Division of Cardiology, was recruited in 1998 to direct the study. He commended the entire study team for their extraordinary efforts in building a superior program that is making significant contributions to the health and well-being of African-Americans and to the body of scientific knowledge on many cardiovascular-related diseases.

"After nearly 15 years of building and leading the study – a career highlight for me – I am proud to transfer its future into the next pair of capable hands. I am now confident that our efforts will serve as a resource for America. I am leaving this post to seek new challenges with confidence the JHS will thrive and prosper," Taylor said.

Keeton noted that even as the initial thrust of the study matured, Taylor and his colleagues identified creative ways to diversify the project, expanding the number of study centers from three to five, and engage researchers from across the country.

"This is an impressive body of work and a national resource of which all Americans, and especially the participants in Jackson, can be justifiably proud," Keeton said.

Taylor said the study has arrived at an incredibly bright point in its trajectory.

"We have developed one of the most important data banks on the planet, both in terms of African-American cardiovascular health and for its implications for a much broader population," he said. "We have over the last several years built a vanguard network of about 10 institutions across the country that is actively collaborating with us on a variety of research studies."

And with the JHS already averaging 30-35 publications annually the past several years, the study is poised to see exponential growth in publications going forward, he said.

Until new permanent leadership is identified, Dr. Adolfo Correa, a physician scientist Taylor recruited in 2011 as chief science officer of the JHS, will serve as interim director. UMMC, JSU and Tougaloo will conduct a national search for a permanent director. Correa holds both an M.D. and Ph.D. and is a dually appointed professor of medicine and pediatrics at UMMC.

"Given Dr. Correa's track record of clinical care, research and leadership, I hold complete confidence in his abilities to keep the study moving forward as it enters this new phase," Keeton said.

Earlier this year, the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, and the National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities, each a part of the NIH, announced renewed funding for the JHS.

The NHLBI awarded UMMC contracts for a Field Center and a Coordinating Center totaling \$9.5 million and \$12 million respectively.

JSU received two contracts from NHLBI totaling about \$9 million for a Community Outreach Center and the Graduate Training and Education Center, both new and integral pieces of the JHS education mission.

Tougaloo received approximately \$6 million from the NHLBI to continue operating the Undergraduate Training Center, through which students seeking baccalaureate degrees gain exposure and training in population research and applied scientific methods.

JHS has followed 5,300 African-Americans in Jackson for more than a decade, compiling data from numerous medical tests, scans, exams and interviews, while also analyzing the effects of lifestyle factors such as diet and community and church involvement on their overall health.

Researchers throughout the world have used the enormous amount of collected data – along with further testing – to produce scientific articles that have appeared in prestigious scientific and health journals.

The study has served as a springboard for community health outreach and other important scientific studies in the African-American community. And it has given training opportunities to dozens of underrepresented college students interested in careers in science, medicine and public health, many of whom have gone on to research careers at prestigious institutions.

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The University of Mississippi Medical Center, located in Jackson, is the state's only academic medical center. UMMC encompasses five health science schools, including medicine, nursing, health related professions, dentistry and graduate studies, as well as the site where University of Mississippi pharmacy students do their clinical training. The Medical Center's health-care enterprise includes five hospitals and University Physicians, the faculty group practice. The Medical Center's threefold mission is to educate tomorrow's health-care professionals, conduct innovative research to improve human health, and to provide the highest quality care available to the state's population. A major goal of the Medical Center is the improvement of the health of Mississippians and the elimination of health disparities. For more information, contact the Division of Public Affairs at (601) 984-1100 or umc.edu/publicaffairs