

at the front lines

Getting outside the silo

Heather Flynn doesn't mince words: "Despite billions of dollars and decades of experts investing their time and energy in depression research, the prevalence rate has remained unchanged. The 'independent investigators doing their own thing' model has just not worked."

So, with a National Institute of Mental Health grant, Flynn is helping to create a new model. It's built around pooling data gathered by multiple researchers nationwide, through the kind of teamwork that thrives at Florida State. That collegial atmosphere, she said, is why she moved here from the University of Michigan in 2011 to become an associate professor in the Department of Medical Humanities and Social Sciences.

Since 1999, she's worked on detecting depression in women around the time of pregnancy.

"If you can do a better job detecting and treating them, you may have an opportunity to prevent poor outcomes not only for the woman but also for the infants," she said. "So you have the potential for a lot of bang for your buck."

Depression, which is twice as common in women as in men, surfaces most commonly during the childbearing years. It rarely gets detected by a health-care provider. But women who are pregnant typically see a doctor – so the goal of Flynn's research has been to help clinicians who encounter pregnant women identify which ones appear to be depressed and how best to intervene.

That goal has proved elusive, for Flynn and many others.

"I started to notice, 'Oh, no, that person's doing the same study that I'm doing!' 'Oh, that person is, too!'" Flynn said. "At first it was alarming. Then I thought: This is crazy. We all have the exact same last paragraph

of our research article, which is: 'We didn't have adequate statistical power to really answer the big-picture question.' It was striking how many people noticed the exact same problem in

the field. They were trying to all do it in their own silos.

"Chronic health problems that are very complex, like depression, diabetes/obesity, cardiovascular disease, HIV/AIDS, will never be solved by one scientist or group. They're so multifaceted that they require a whole team of experts."

She started talking to other researchers, one on one, and they said, "It'd be a great idea if everybody would network." So Flynn started helping to organize them.

With the current NIMH grant, researchers are pooling 12 databases nationally into one and "cleaning" the data to allow apples-to-apples comparisons. Flynn is the co-principal investigator.

She earned her clinical psychology degrees at FSU before the medical school was created in 2000.

Flynn loves the research environment here: "I was so attracted to the community-based model at the College of Medicine. It's an amazing context in which you can really understand important nuances about how to prevent, treat and manage these illnesses in the community. That's really the reason I came here."

She is also co-chair of the Women & Mood Disorders Network, part of the National Network of Depression Centers. Though frustrated that the word "depression" still carries a stigma, she's upbeat about what lies ahead if interdisciplinary collaboration puts public health ahead of career goals.

"I think the sky's the limit," she said. "Everybody values the same thing, which is, 'I want to make a difference.'"

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Heather Flynn