



WOMEN OF NOTE

CRAIN'S WOMEN OF NOTE ★ AWARDS

CRAIN'S annual recognition of 15 women who demonstrate an exceptional commitment to Northeast Ohio and its citizens.



Dr. Grace McComsey

Chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases, University Hospitals Rainbow Babies & Children's Hospital



TWEET

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People who knew Dr. Grace McComsey, chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases at University Hospitals Rainbow Babies & Children's Hospital, thought she was being paranoid earlier this year when she began sounding the alarm as COVID-19 spread around the world.

"They'd never seen me like that, and I said, 'Trust me, it's going to come,' " recalled McComsey, also vice president of research and associate chief scientific officer for the health system.

Even before the virus was detected in Ohio, McComsey worked to make UH a site for a COVID-19 clinical trial, in which the system enrolled 100 patients to study the investigational antiviral drug remdesivir.

"Her determination, her passion, her never-say-no approach is what got 100 patients in Northeast Ohio treated with this lifesaving drug," Dr. Daniel Simon, president of UH Cleveland Medical Center, said. "If you said, 'Who made it happen?' Grace."

Now, the system has more than 80 different COVID-19-related studies.

Growing up in Lebanon, McComsey wanted to be an engineer. But at her parents' insistence, she took the national exam for medical school and, despite not majoring in the subject in high school, ranked ninth in the country and ultimately pursued a career in medicine. When she told her parents that she wanted to practice in the United States, they thought she was joking — she didn't speak any English and only began learning in the months before her arrival.

In the early 2000s, McComsey was a trainee in the lab of an HIV researcher at Case Western Reserve University. She became fascinated by something seen in many HIV patients: lipodystrophy, the abnormal distribution of fat. While some physicians dismissed the problem at the time because the patients were surviving, McComsey said that wasn't enough. She wanted to improve their quality of life.

McComsey admits a tendency to be "stubborn." A former mentor told her she was likely to fail because no one in the region did that type of research. So she called a researcher at Baylor University and said, "I'm a young investigator from Cleveland. I don't have a lot of money, but I have idea for you that you can help me in your lab."

The researcher agreed to run lab tests for free from patients McComsey would enroll in Cleveland. That work led to them understanding the mitochondrial toxicity of HIV drugs and ultimately avoiding them. With new drugs, they're not seeing lipodystrophy.

"I'm proud of it that I took on an area of research that nobody here at Case was doing," said McComsey, also chief of pediatric infectious diseases and professor of pediatrics and medicine at CWRU.

Since 2017, she has led the UH Clinical Research Center, streamlining the processes for the 2,500 research studies she oversees. Eliminating unnecessary internal regulatory barriers researchers had to deal with to gain approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) dropped the number of policies from 500 to 50. The IRB process used to take six to eight months, which "discouraged research," she said. She worked to get it down to three weeks.

Unsurprisingly, McComsey does not sleep much. She did all writing for a \$5 million grant – which she did receive – exclusively past 10 p.m., after work and time with her family.

"She's a very focused, data-driven, results-oriented person and has sort of dogged determination," Simon said. "(Dr.) Mukesh (Jain, UH chief academic officer) and I say that there's a lion inside of Grace."

Beyond research, 10%-15% of McComsey's work is direct patient care. Because she likes everything about her job, McComsey continues to juggle all her roles. Her attempt to give up her division chief title was met with faculty begging her to stay. Cutting back on clinical care prompted patients to call and say they didn't want to go anywhere else.

"I like too much in my job, and I'm not giving up stuff," McComsey said. – *Lydia Coutré*

The McComsey file

Favorite spot in Northeast Ohio: Edgewater Park

Hobbies: Playing tennis, although these days those skills are transferred to lightsaber battles with her 11-year-old twin boys.

Best piece of advice she ever received: Growing up, her parents told her she could do anything she wanted and instilled in her a deep sense of equality.