



Stanford United Students for Veterans' Health Newsletter

USVH Quick Facts

-  Serves long-term care patients in Veterans Affairs (VA) Hospitals
-  Founded in 1994
-  Headquartered in the Haas Center for Public Service
-  5 chapters nationwide in: Worcester, Massachusetts
Santa Clara University
Stanford University
San Francisco State University
University of Texas
-  Over 62 active volunteers in the Stanford chapter
-  Volunteering shifts happening every day of the week

USVH National Board 2015-2016

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Thanks for a great year!

Interview with Dr. Amit Etkin, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University

Can you tell us about some of the main objectives of the Etkin lab?

Our aim, put most broadly, is to understand the brain mechanisms of major mental illnesses so that we can design and implement novel brain-based treatments for them. As such, we end up studying a range of psychiatric disorders, especially those with anxiety, depression or post-traumatic features (so that we cover the territory and let the biology rather than our own preconceptions guide the work). We similarly end up studying a range of current interventions (psychotherapy, medication and brain stimulation) to understand how these treatments work. Finally, we have been playing with various ways to modulate brain circuitry, including non-invasive brain stimulation and brain training.

How did you develop your current research interests?

Where there any particular experiences that inspired you?

As a neuroscientist, I've been fascinated by how the human brain generates such diverse and amazing things such as thoughts and emotion. As a psychiatrist, I've been very frustrated with the tools we have to diagnose and treat patients, and their relative ineffectiveness. Bringing these two backgrounds and interests together is the perfect mix (for me) of intellectual curiosity and ability to have impact on the lives of others.

What are some of the challenges of your work?

Many! Perhaps the biggest, however, is that I find too often my thinking, and that of my colleagues, is too bound by the diagnostic and scientific system we work under. It is all too easy to fall into the rut of "typical thinking"...the kind that in the end has not taken us very far in either neuroscience or psychiatry. The worst part of it is that you can still

get rewarded (in a career-sense) for following the typical route, meaning that impactful and exciting science takes a lot of active work to maintain.

What do you find most rewarding about your career?

The real potential for the work I am doing is impacting the lives of many others.

Can you tell us about the Steven and Alexandra Cohen Veterans Study on Post-traumatic Stress and TBI and your contributions to the study?

The goal of the study is to find biomarkers -- objective biological measures -- that identify somebody as having PTSD or TBI (or a subtype of them). As such, our goal is to take these illnesses out of the realm of subjectivity and render them properly diagnosable on objective tests. Most importantly for me, these tests should say something about treatment....whether they will respond to treatment or what kind of treatment they should get. Our part of it, beyond recruitment of patients alongside the other clinical site (NYU), is to take the lead on characterization of brain circuitry alterations in these patients.

What are the most promising treatments for PTSD currently?

We are still further than I'd like to be from a treatment I'm particularly excited about. However, I am very enthusiastic about the promise of non-invasive brain stimulation. A lot of work in the lab has gone towards identifying the critical circuitry in the brain involved in PTSD, as well as methods by which we can use non-invasive brain stimulation as a "lever" on that circuitry. Moreover, treating PTSD as a disorder of brain circuitry, rather than one of bravery, will or mental strength, can serve to better engage patients in their diagnosis and treatment.



"Much more than any other population we have recruited, [Veterans] have proved in general easier to work with and more willing to do their part to further the science that will eventually help their peers."

- Dr. Amit Etkin, MD, PhD, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University

What do you enjoy about working with veterans?

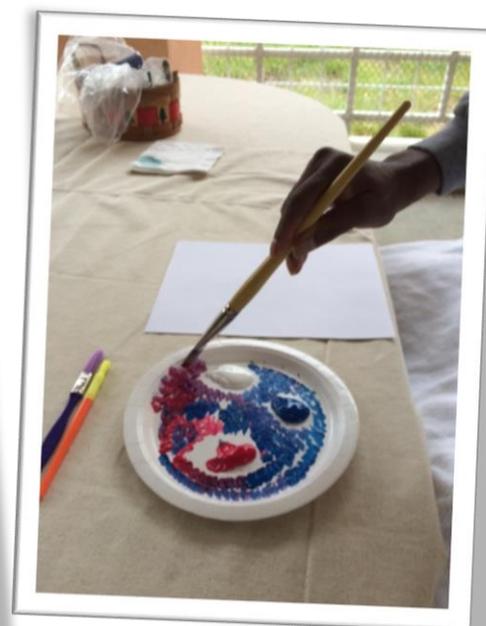
Both in working with Vets as lab members and with Vets as study participants, I am frequently struck by their dedication towards each other, and their desire to help and be part of a greater mission. The drive I see in the Vets that work in the lab, arranged around the larger vision that drives our work, is inspiring...and made more so by virtue of the fact that they hadn't gone straight through school and into graduate school. As participants, we rely on the willingness of Vets to take part in research, and see it as more than just an opportunity to earn a few dollars. Much more than any other population we have recruited, Vets have proved in general easier to work with and more willing to do their part to further the science that will eventually help their peers.

Recap: Art in the Park

USVH Directors of Special Events Montana Morris and Alyssa Morrison coordinated with recreational therapists and staff at the Menlo Park VA to hold its annual Art in the Park event on May 8th, 2016.

Art in the Park provided various art stations for the veterans' enjoyment. Art stations included puzzles, origami, painting, coloring, and mural making. Veterans rotated among the different stations and enjoyed refreshments of watermelon, coffee, and popcorn provided by Stanford USVH.

Counterpoint, Stanford's first all-female a cappella group, performed a set of songs for the veterans at noon. Veterans and volunteers alike enjoyed listening to the music. Thank you, Counterpoint, for giving your time and talents to this great event!



Thanks for a great year!

Dear volunteers,

On behalf of the 2015-2016 USVH National Board of Directors, I would like to thank you for another successful year!

Combined, Stanford United Students of Veterans Health has contributed over 2,000 hours of service this year. Most importantly, you have made a positive impact on the lives of the veterans at the Menlo Park VA. I hope you have enjoyed volunteering as much as the veterans have enjoyed your company. We appreciate your dedication to USVH and hope to see you back next year!

Kelly Chen
National USVH Director of Communications