Prestigious Award Honors Dr. Jacqueline O’Leary

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Jacqueline O’Leary, MD, MPH, was honored with an American Society of Transplantation (AST) Achievement Award at the May 5 AST Awards Ceremony. She received the AST Clinical Science Investigator Award during the 2015 American Transplant Congress in Philadelphia.

Selected by the AST board of directors, the recipient of this award must have made a substantial contribution to the field of transplantation medicine, and show signs of a bright future ahead in transplantation.

"Dr. O’Leary is simply a star in our field," says Josh Levitsky, MD, MS, associate professor of medicine and surgery, program director of Liver Research, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. "She has been incredibly productive and has made significant contributions to transplantation — most notably in reinvigorating and redefining the interest in humoral immunity in liver transplantation."

She’s produced more than 40 original publications in top journals (the vast majority as a first author), numerous abstracts, research and presentations, webinars, book chapters, reviews and editorials and spends a large quantity of her time doing research to advance the field of science in three areas:

- Understanding the role of antibody-mediated rejection in liver transplantation — a major focus for the last five years.
- Treating and curing patients with hepatitis C — with specific dedication to all types of transplant recipients.
- Understanding and preventing infections in patients with cirrhosis.

"The reason I focus on these areas is that they have the highest risk for death," says Dr. O’Leary. She has seen progress in all three of her areas of focus. "Over the last 10 years we’ve seen a revolution in HCVG therapy from poorly tolerated, very toxic medicines that rarely resulted in cure — to now all-oral therapy, even for transplant patients, that can achieve greater than 90 percent cure in as little as three months."

In 2013, Dr. O’Leary was co-chair of the Baylor Simmons Transplant Institute conference on donor-specific antibodies in liver transplantation. According to Howard M. Gebel, PhD, professor of pathology, co-director, histocompatibility and molecular immunogenetics laboratory, Emory Healthcare, "She is the thought leader in this specific area of transplantation. Her presentations challenge the paradigm that donor specific HLA antibodies in liver transplant recipients are innocuous. Dr. O'Leary's data are convincing her colleagues to reexamine this widely held belief, an achievement I personally applaud."

Dr. O’Leary explains, "Our program was really the first to evaluate donor-specific antibodies in liver transplantation and show a strong correlation with poor outcomes. Now we, together with our collaborators throughout the U.S., have defined for the first-time diagnosis, end points for clinical trials." Now, they are embarking on a host of new efforts to prevent problems and improve outcomes.

Dedicated to improving quantity and quality of life for patients both before and after transplants, Dr. O’Leary says, "I like to discover something new that helps people — being able to translate research findings into improved clinical care. We’ve really improved our ability to find problems early and intervene so we can prevent complications down the road. We’re trying to do a better job of diagnosing problems with blood tests or biomarkers out of blood instead of having to do invasive tests like liver biopsies."

She was attracted to a career in medicine by an uncle who was a physician. His cancer diagnosis and death initially focused her attention on cancer research. The opportunity to impact patients through transplantation drew Dr. O’Leary to her current work in hepatology, because, "When patients get very sick with liver disease, they may have a transplant, and it's like a rebirth — which is really wonderful to experience."

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