When the story of University of Pittsburgh medical education and research is written, two capital letters will leap off the page: VA. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is a largely unsung and often unrecognized major player in Pitt physician education and research. More than half of Pitt’s medical school graduates spend time during their rotations tending to patients in one of three VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System hospitals. Some $24.5 million in Pitt research is at least partially funded by the VA, and more than 200 faculty members hold joint Pitt-VA appointments.

“Very definitely, people don’t understand the importance of the VA in promoting basic scientific research,” says Peter Strick, professor of neurobiology and codirector of the Center for the Neural Basis of Cognition, a partnership with Carnegie Mellon University. Strick is a VA senior career research scientist in addition to his university affiliations; up to one-third of the support for
his laboratory and its much-admired work in mapping previously unrecognized communication between brain centers is underwritten by the VA. Strick cites the little-known key contributions of VA scientists to basic research, noting in particular the 1977 Nobel Prize to Rosalyn Yalow of the Bronx VA Medical Center for developing the radioimmunoassay test.

The East Side New York girl decided early on that she wanted to be a physicist; and as a young woman, she was further inspired by Madame Curie’s biography. But in 1941 it seemed unlikely that good graduate schools would accept or offer financial support to a woman. She graduated with high honors from the then all-female Hunter College, yet the only semiscientific job she could get was as a part-time secretary to a biochemistry professor—she could type and agreed to take stenography courses. She eventually filled an opening as a graduate assistant taking classes and teaching physics at the University of Illinois (where she was the only woman among 399 men and where, upon receiving three As in her coursework and an A-minus for lab work, she was told the A-minus confirms that “women do not do well at laboratory work”).

When the war ended she returned to New York and there found that the VA was more accepting of female researchers. She stayed at the unheralded Bronx Center for 30 years, where she could pursue her fascination with radioactivity. The radioimmunoassay was developed in 1959, and since has become the basic science questions and clinical medicine.

“The clinician-scientist has become an endangered species,” adds Steve Graham, the VA’s associate chief of staff for research and a Pitt professor of neurology. “The VA provides an environment where the physician-scientist can prosper. VA training, with its close exposure to patients, develops a cadre of physicians who see, firsthand, patient needs and whose research interests grow out of the problems they encounter at bedside.” The VA boasts plenty of great MDs who explore underlying basic questions of physiology (like Pitt’s David Roodman, profiled in this issue, and John Hibbs, MD ’62, of nitric oxide fame at the University of Utah). Yet the VA also is a place where researchers are encouraged to look at immediate matters of improving patient care. Pitt’s Strick notes, also, that VA-trained MDs and PhDs work closely together. Neurobiologists with an intricate knowledge of brain anatomy stand at the neurosurgeon’s elbow to guide the deep-brain stimulation now used to treat Parkinson’s disease and other movement disorders; a minuscule error in placement can make the treatment futile—or worse.

The exact roots of Pitt-VA (and, indeed, of VA-auspices) research appear lost to history. During the 1920s and 1930s, doctors at VA hospitals informally, and often out of their own pockets, carried on clinical research projects on veteran-related problems that intrigued them, like the respiratory disorders produced by poison gas in World War I. Some of this informal research was conducted at the Aspinwall Hospital (now the H.J. Heinz III Progressive Care Center) by physicians affiliated with the School of Medicine.

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