

Observations

March 08, 2011

Healthy Decisions

After testing positive for a gene linked to breast cancer, actress Christina Applegate had both breasts removed in an effort to prevent her breast cancer from recurring. Did she make the right decision? Should a man have surgery for prostate cancer, which might affect sexual activity and bladder control, or choose watchful waiting? Can a teenager learn to avoid pregnancy, HIV-AIDS, or cervical cancer by making rational decisions about unprotected sex?

The National Cancer Institute has sponsored a special issue of the journal *Medical Decision Making* that addresses such questions, featuring open-access articles by psychological scientists and a commentary by the chair of the Evidence-Based Practice Committee of the Society for Behavioral Medicine. The articles, selected by current and former officers of the Society for Medical Decision Making and other scientists, provide a brief introduction to current theories of risky decision making, behavioral change, health promotion, and medical decision making. The hope is that understanding theoretical mechanisms will improve assessments of decision quality, prevention programs (e.g., risk communication), and intervention efforts, including decision aids. To read the articles in the special issue, visit <http://mdm.sagepub.com/content/vol28/issue6>. ?

Hail, Fellows

Several APS Fellows are among the 486 newly elected Fellows of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). AAAS was created in 1848 and is the world's largest general scientific society, with more than 120,000 members. AAAS may be best known as the publisher of the journal *Science* (which, interestingly, was started by pioneering psychologist James McKeen Cattell). The new Fellows, including the individuals below, will be honored during the AAAS Annual Meeting in Chicago on February 14, 2009.

Martin S. Banks, University of California, Berkeley
Lisa Feldman Barrett, Boston College
Eliot A. Brenowitz, University of Washington
Nathan Fox, University of Maryland
John D.E. Gabrieli, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Barbara Landau, Johns Hopkins University
Douglas L. Medin, Northwestern University
Laura-Ann Petitto, University of Toronto
Linda P. Spear, Binghamton University

Anne Treisman Receives Grawemeyer Award for Psychology

Anne Treisman of Princeton University is the 2009 recipient of the University of Louisville Grawemeyer Award for Psychology, an annual award that recognizes outstanding work from the science of psychology.

Treisman is APS Secretary and has received the APS William James Fellow Award for her lifetime contributions in basic psychological science.

Treisman's research focuses on visual attention, visual memory, and object perception in humans. In 1980, Treisman proposed that during perception, specific features of an object, such as shape and color, are initially processed separately and are then combined into objects we recognize. This idea, known as the Feature Integration Theory, has become one of the most influential models of visual attention. The Grawemeyer Award, designed to honor a specific idea or creative work, was given to Treisman in recognition of the impact of the Feature Integration Theory on a variety of disciplines, including neuroscience and philosophy.

Treisman grew up in Great Britain and received her doctoral degree in psychology from Oxford University. In addition to the Grawemeyer Award, she has received honorary doctoral degrees from University College London and the University of British Columbia. Treisman is a Fellow of the Royal Society, London, and was elected to the National Academy of Sciences. In 1996, Treisman became the first psychologist to be given the Golden Brain Award from the Minerva Foundation.

Upon finding out she has won this year's Grawemeyer prize, Treisman "was of course surprised and thrilled to receive the award." The award includes a \$200,000 cash prize.

In addition to psychology, Grawemeyer Awards are granted in the fields of music composition, religion, and education. For more information about the Grawemeyer Awards, visit <http://grawemeyer.org>.

Obesity in Older Adults: Aging Institute Briefs Congress on Behavioral Research

Obesity is now the second leading cause of preventable deaths in this country (smoking is still the first). Much of the media attention on this topic focuses on young people, but obesity is very much a problem for older adults. In one of the first such programs to be held in the new session of Congress, the director of the behavioral and social research branch of the National Institute on Aging (NIA), Richard Suzman, talked to Congressional staff about behavioral factors in obesity and what that means for our aging population. His presentation was part of a briefing sponsored by the Alliance on Aging Research. Robert Friedland, director of the Center on an Aging Society based at Georgetown University, also participated.

Friedland, an economist, said that just as many kids as older adults are obese, but it's more problematic for the latter population, which experiences a higher rate of the chronic health conditions associated with obesity. Suzman talked about the consequences of elderly obesity, such as decreased life expectancies and rising disability rates. Suzman also discussed recent research by Christakis & Fowler (2007) that documents the spread of obesity through social networks. Although this was largely a demographic study, at its heart is the question of what processes of person-to-person influence are making such social networks so potent for spreading health behaviors.

Suzman also told the Congressional audience about research on behavior change. He referred to a recent study on behavioral interventions for patients with diabetes, which found that lifestyle changes were more powerful than pharmacological treatment in reducing the symptoms of diabetes (Diabetes Prevention Program Research Group, 2002). Another promising study applies the principles of behavioral economics to combat obesity by using financial incentives to reward weight loss (Volpp, 2008). Much more research is needed to fully understand the mechanisms of behavior change, and a new National Institutes of Health initiative is tackling this issue (the Transformative R01 program; see November 2008 *Observer* <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/getArticle.cfm?id=2421>).

“Giving people information usually isn’t enough,” Suzman said. “Our hope is that the initiative on the basic science of behavior change will help us develop interventions that help people to do what they already want to do but just can’t seem to get past the hurdle of inaction.”

-Amy Pollick

References

- Christakis, N. A. & Fowler, J. H. (2007). The spread of obesity in a large social network over 32 years. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 357, 370-379.
- Diabetes Prevention Program Research Group. (2002). Reduction in the incidence of Type 2 Diabetes with lifestyle intervention or metformin. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 346, 393-403.
- Volpp, K. G., John, L. K., Troxel, A. B., Norton, L., Fassbender, J., & Loewenstein, G. (2008). Financial incentive-based approaches for weight loss. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 300, 2631-2637.