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SHARON HILLIER RECEIVES AWARD AT INTERNATIONAL MEETING

PITTSBURGH, June 24, 2009 – Sharon Hillier, Ph.D., is receiving the American Sexually Transmitted Diseases Association’s prestigious Thomas Parran Award on July 1 during the 18th International Society for Sexually Transmitted Diseases Research (ISSTD) meeting in London, England.

Dr. Hillier, professor and vice chair for faculty affairs and director of reproductive infectious disease research in the Division of Reproductive Infectious Diseases and Immunology, Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, is being honored for her distinguished contributions to the field of STD research and prevention.

The award holds particular meaning for her because it is named for syphilis expert Thomas Parran, Jr., M.D., who was the first dean of Pitt’s Graduate School of Public Health (GSPH) and “who forced the government to confront diseases society would rather ignore,” she said, a role that she, too, must sometimes play in her professional life.

“As my daughter once explained to her 4th grade teacher, ‘My mom works on the kinds of infections nobody wants to get and almost nobody wants to talk about,’” Dr. Hillier said.

That taboo list is typically topped by HIV/AIDS, and Dr. Hillier, a microbiologist, is dedicated to finding practical, effective and safe strategies to prevent the spread of the virus, particularly in women. As the principal investigator for the Microbicide Trials Network (MTN), an HIV/AIDS clinical trials network established in 2006 by the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, she leads an international team of researchers in this mission. She also is a senior investigator at Magee-Womens Research Institute.

Dr. Hillier’s research focuses on understanding both the preventive and causative roles that certain microorganisms in the vagina play with respect to genital tract infections, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as HIV, and pre-term birth; and on the evaluation of vaginal microbicides for prevention of STIs in women. In addition to her role as principal investigator for MTN, Dr. Hillier is principal investigator of an NIH-funded grant looking at non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors as combination microbicides, and she is co-principal investigator of two prevention studies, one focused on Group B streptococcal disease and the other on infertility in women with subclinical pelvic inflammatory disease.

“Dr. Hillier is very deserving of this honor,” noted W. Allen Hogge, M.D., chairman of Pitt’s obstetrics and gynecology department. “Her efforts could one day spare the lives of some of the world’s most at-risk and vulnerable women, as well as their children, from HIV infection.”

At the award ceremony, Dr. Hillier will deliver a lecture, also named for Dr. Parran, called “My Toils in the Secret Garden.” She will describe her efforts to understand how antibiotics and probiotics change the micro-organism environment in the genital tract and how that in turn influences the prevention or acquisition of sexually transmitted infections. She also will talk about using microbicides to alter the vaginal environment to prevent HIV spread from infected men to women.

Thomas Parran, Jr., was born in 1892 and received his medical degree from Georgetown University in 1915. With an interest in rural and population health, he eventually completed the equivalent of a master's degree in public health. In 1926, he became chief of the venereal diseases division of the Public Health Service, and in 1930, New York's state health commissioner. President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed him U.S. Surgeon General in 1936 until 1948. In 1946, he chaired the conference where the draft constitution was adopted for the World Health Organization.

Dr. Parran joined the University of Pittsburgh in 1948 as the first dean of GSPH. He brought with him his deputy surgeon general, James A. Crabtree, who in 1958 succeeded him as dean and who also has a hall in the building named for him. Dr. Parran died in Pittsburgh on February 16, 1968, and the following year, the building that houses GSPH was named in his honor.

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