



CATHERINE LAZURE

He's for Kids

Infection is the leading cause of death in children under 5 years old world-wide, and infectious and inflammatory diseases together land more American children in the hospital than anything else. To help kids get and stay healthy, Pitt and UPMC created the Institute for Infection, Inflammation and Immunity in Children (i4Kids) last year.

John V. Williams, who holds the Henry L. Hillman Chair in Pediatric Immunology and is a professor of pediatrics at Pitt, was named i4Kids director. Williams says he spends a lot of time thinking about what is missing from pediatric illness research, and he hopes to make i4Kids an epicenter for research, prevention and treatment of diseases in children.

"Nobody is going to say they don't care about kids; but as a society, we're not putting our money where our mouth is," says Williams.

Williams, along with Anna Wang-Erickson, associate director and assistant professor of pediatrics, will lead the institute that was established under the guidance of Terence Dermody, who is the Vira I.

Heinz Professor and chair of pediatrics at Pitt, as well as physician-in-chief and scientific director at UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh. The institute will support multidisciplinary projects from the health, natural, physical and computer sciences.



Williams

In an effort with Marian Michaels, professor of pediatrics, Williams also oversees a CDC-funded pediatric virus surveillance network with Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh—one of seven national sites. The network seeks to determine the effectiveness of flu vaccines and describes the epidemiology of respiratory infections, including COVID-19, among children hospitalized or evaluated in the emergency department.

Williams is being recognized with the Norman J. Siegel Outstanding Science Award from the American Pediatric Society this May.

—Maggie Medoff

Ready, Player?

Even before the pandemic, people with cystic fibrosis were advised to keep at least 6 feet from each other. The danger of cross-infection has been a threat they've had to keep in mind throughout their lives. That mandated distancing has impeded commiseration and played into the high rates of depression and anxiety experienced by teens with CF. (Their parents are affected, as well.)

Dmitriy Babichenko is betting that educational video games may improve the health of kids with CF and other conditions. With an interdisciplinary team, he received a Pitt Seed Project grant from the Office of the Chancellor to create games about living well, even when you have a disease. Babichenko, a clinical associate professor in the School of Computing and Information, joined forces with colleagues, including experts from the Schools of Pharmacy and Nursing, as well as UPMC, to develop two games. He credits much of the design to computer science students. Pitt English majors built the story structures, and a music student composed the score.

Combined, these elements form narrative-based, role-playing games (think a digital "Dungeons and Dragons") that kids play as characters who make choices about health. One of the games will provide nutritional guidance to younger children to address obesity. The other is designed to encourage teenagers with CF to become more proactive in their own complex care, which they'll need to manage themselves one day soon. It also gives them an opportunity to get to know others with CF—remotely.

Babichenko will soon begin a study to determine each game's effectiveness. He's already workshoped them with preliminary focus groups. "Ten-year-old kids are brutal," he says with a laugh. —Alyce Palko