Finding A Framework for Patient-Centered Care
with Erikson Scholar Brig. General Stephen Xenakis, MD (ret.)

In the world of science, paradigm shifts are rare and occur in contexts often fraught with tension, difficulty and disagreement. And yet, 2015 Erikson Scholar Brig. Gen. Stephen Xenakis, MD (ret.), contends “a paradigm shift is what is needed – from diagnosis-centered care to patient-centered care.” While not a radical notion, shifting to a more patient-centered approach, given the current framework of our medical and mental health systems, is a daunting proposal. “In medicine, you get treated based on what door you walk through,” says Dr. Xenakis, a reality that he believes is best confronted by “building a framework platform that can be used by clinicians to think of patients in a more patient-focused systems way.” To that end, Dr. Xenakis is working on developing such a framework during his tenure as an Erikson Scholar at Riggs.

A military psychiatrist by training, Dr. Xenakis describes himself as a “systems guy” with an ongoing interest in modeling that he says, “has been fundamental to how I approach my clinical work and how I approached my role as commander [in the military].” While not an analyst, he did receive psychoanalytic training, about which he remarked, “I feel grounded in that; it has organized my clinical work.” He founded the Center for Transitional Medicine, which develops treatments and conducts tests on brain-related conditions affecting soldiers and veterans, has been a senior adviser to the Department of Defense and has written widely on medical ethics, military medicine and treatment of detainees.

Dr. Xenakis learned about the Austen Riggs Center through Riggs advisory board member and winner of the 2011 Erikson Prize for Excellence in Mental Health Media Jennifer Senior; Senior was working on an article about American soldiers and PTSD for New York Magazine and interviewed Dr. Xenakis. The article came out in 2011 and Senior then became instrumental in bringing Dr. Xenakis to Riggs for that year’s Fall Conference, titled Untold Stories, Hidden Wounds: War Trauma and its Treatment. He was encouraged by then Erikson Institute Director M. Gerard Fromm, PhD, and current Erikson Institute Director Jane G. Tillman, PhD, to apply to the Erikson Scholar program, which he did, resulting in his current tenure at Riggs.

“This is just perfect … it is a great opportunity to come here and flesh out ideas,” remarked Dr. Xenakis, who is spending his time as an Erikson Scholar working on a framework that clinicians (including case managers) can utilize for the formulation of treatment of complex cases where trauma is comorbid with other issues. The framework is based on systems theory, which, Dr. Xenakis notes is different from how we typically look at clinical treatment. “The exchange of ideas between Erikson Scholars and clinicians at Riggs enriches the work and the thinking of both. The broad external perspective Dr. Xenakis brings, particularly related to trauma and systems theory, is important for us to hear. Likewise, the depth of the work done at Riggs, often with patients who have experienced significant trauma, will hopefully prove informative to Dr. Xenakis’ work and research,” stated Erikson Institute Director, Jane G. Tillman, PhD.

Speaking about his experience as an Erikson Scholar at Riggs, Dr. Xenakis pointed to the “cloistered enough environment” that provides a “refuge” for him from common daily distractions, allowing him to really focus and spend time thinking and working in a meaningful way.

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What made you interested in becoming the medical director/CEO for the Austen Riggs Center?

I have been passionate about the mission of Austen Riggs since first learning about it as a graduate student 21 years ago. I felt the role of medical director/CEO would enable me to bring together everything from my previous training and career that is most important and most needed in contemporary psychiatry, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. I believe that Riggs is a unique institution that can and should serve as a beacon for meaning-based psychotherapy and psychoanalysis in the wider world. I hope to build on the wonderful things already going on at Riggs and help professionals in psychiatry and psychology as well as the wider community know what it stands for.

Riggs is very proud of its psychoanalytic tradition. What is your experience in psychoanalysis?

I have had a passion for psychoanalytic thinking since I was first exposed to it as an undergraduate at Yale, where I was taught by Sidney Blatt, PhD, and Peter Gay, PhD, and through my own reading of Freud and later psychoanalysts. My PhD in psychology with Peter Fonagy, PhD, and Joseph Sandler, MD, PhD, built upon this early interest and made me decide to pursue clinical training in psychoanalysis. I was determined to get the broadest and most comprehensive training in mental health possible and so pursued medical training en route to becoming a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and research scientist. After completing medical school, I chose one of the psychiatry residencies in the United States with the strongest psychoanalytic mission and depth (Weill Cornell Medical College); this allowed me to begin my psychoanalytic training while still a third year resident. I graduated from the Columbia Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research in 2010.

Many people associate your work with research; can you elaborate on how this might work at Riggs?

To me empirical research and psychoanalytic clinical work have always gone hand in hand and I believe that the sense of them as necessarily in opposition is an unfortunate sociologic phenomenon that we must work against. Certainly, there are historical differences in the training received by primary clinicians and primary researchers and there will always be individuals who are more interested in one than the other, but to me the approaches are equally necessary for the benefit of our field and our patients. In my own career, and in the environment where I believe psychoanalytic scholarship most prospers, clinicians and researchers are constantly in dialogue. Clinical advances lead to important experiments, whose results should, in turn, stimulate new clinical practices.

Much of my research at Columbia has been informed by that tradition. For example, with the help of a generous donor at Columbia, we developed a joint clinical and research program in evidence-based psychodynamic treatment for mothers and their young children suffering from difficulties related to depression and/or trauma. Since that time, this program has grown into a recognized hub of psychoanalytic clinical work and research in New York City, bringing together leading clinicians and researchers to discuss clinical work and how best to measure and improve it using empirical methods. The group includes over 15 clinicians, researchers and students who learn and work together in this important area.

What do you see as a unique contribution your leadership will provide for Riggs?

I hope that my leadership will help advance the cause of psychodynamic/psychoanalytic treatment and scholarship by publicizing the unique work done at Austen Riggs and through further organizing empirical research, closely integrated on the one side with psychoanalytic clinicians and theorists, and on the other side with contemporary departments of psychiatry and psychology, which emphasize evidence-based psychotherapy and cognitive neuroscience.

I have held and currently hold many professional roles that have allowed me to become a national and international leader, organizer and advocate for psychodynamic research. I believe that the psychodynamic perspective has an enormous amount to contribute to contemporary psychiatric and psychological clinical work and science, often underappreciated because of a combination of the growing isolation of the psychoanalytic world and the movement of psychiatry and psychology to an evidence-based and neuroscience model that is incorrectly thought to be at odds with the psychodynamic world view. With respected roles in both worlds (i.e., psychoanalytic and psychiatry/psychology/evidence-based psychotherapy/cognitive neuroscience), I have been able to bridge this gap and encourage cross-fertilization of both sides with the contributions of the other. I believe that these exact skills will be useful in a leadership role at Austen Riggs, though necessarily adapted to the specific requirements and history of this clinically focused institution.

We understand your family is very important to you. Can you tell us about them?

My wife of 12 years, Andrea Flores Gerber, is a clinical psychologist who specializes in eating disorders. We have two wonderful daughters: Samantha, who is 8, and Lila, who is 5. We will be living in Stockbridge and my daughters will be attending a local elementary school. My wife and I first met in Boston and early on shared a love of the Berkshires and outdoor activities. We are eager to immerse ourselves in the community, meeting new friends and neighbors, and raising our daughters in what we believe is an idyllic family setting.
Staff Psychologist
E. Virginia Demos, EdD, Retires

“It is the love of the work that keeps people here; the work keeps them here” said E. Virginia Demos, EdD, reflecting on her successful, more than two decade career at Riggs as a therapist, teacher and learner. It was her work as a developmental psychologist and her work with children that brought Dr. Demos to the Erikson Scholar program at Riggs in 1994. Then it was her love of the work at Riggs that turned a temporary visit into a lasting and meaningful part of her career. “They accepted me and I was not like them. They took a chance and made room for my voice,” Dr. Demos said. While Riggs will certainly miss her voice, it is grateful to her for her many contributions and wishes her all the best in her retirement.

James Sacksteder, MD, Retires
After Four Decades with Riggs

How do you say goodbye to someone who, for so long, has been such an integral part of the fabric of the Riggs community? And how do you express gratitude to someone who has given so much of himself to Riggs, his patients and his colleagues? A dinner, honoring Dr. Sacksteder and his career on Saturday, June 27, provided an opportunity to attempt answers to these questions.

Friends, Board members, colleagues, “so many staff members from so many different staff groups from so many different eras” as Erikson Institute Senior Consultant M. Gerard Fromm, PhD, remarked, gathered to celebrate a man whose remarkable career at Riggs spanned forty years, culminating with him in the role of medical director/CEO. Dr. Fromm observed, “It is in the role of director of patient care that Jim leaves his greatest legacy,” spoke of the “sense of duty and devotion he has brought to everything he has ever done at Riggs” and stated simply about Dr. Sacksteder, “your grace … has been amazing.”

Riggs staff psychiatrist Barri Belnap, MD, asked the question of how Dr. Sacksteder survived, answering, “In some way you seemed to survive by being profoundly human, allowing a place for all that is human, meeting fear and pain and disgust with humor and interest.” She turned to Marge Piercy’s words from her 1982 poem To Be of Use to speak about Dr. Sacksteder:

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.

In his remarks about Dr. Sacksteder, Director of Admissions and Associate Medical Director Eric Plakun, MD, said, “He has devoted himself to understanding the nature of human nature and to an approach to treatment based on recognition that people need people from cradle to grave,” and spoke of “Jim’s passionate commitment to Riggs and its mission.”

A departure such as this, brings both grief over what the Riggs community has lost, but also hope for the new beginnings that await us all: he who has left, those who remain and those who will step into the space the departure creates.

Two Fellows Graduate

Mark Elliot, MD, and Jeb Fowler, PhD, each completed a four-year post-doctoral Fellowship at Riggs (Dr. Elliot in advanced psychoanalytic psychotherapy and Dr. Fowler in advanced psychoanalytic psychotherapy and psychoanalytic studies) and were recognized and celebrated at a lively and heartfelt dinner in early June. Addressing the graduates, James Sacksteder, MD, remarked “it has been a privilege and pleasure for me to have been your colleague and to have participated in your development; I am grateful to you for all that you have brought to the Center.”
Summer Research Internship Program Revitalized

The Erikson Institute for Education and Research has a history of hosting undergraduate research interns in the summer, and 2015 saw this program revitalized and expanded. The largest group to date — nine interns — were selected through a competitive application process. From June 1 throughout the summer, the interns worked with fourteen staff mentors and were engaged in sixteen different projects. The program is overseen by Manager of Institutional Research Kim Hunter-Schaedle, PhD.

Intern project topics covered a broad spectrum: analysis of psychological testing data; tracking mood fluctuations in treatment and beyond; impact of birth stories on later life suicide risk; mapping out the underpinnings of posttraumatic stress disorder; and charting Riggs clinical archive data dating back to the mid-twentieth century. In a different vein, two interns spent time with the marketing and business development team, taking a closer look at Riggs web and social media presence, and writing material for the Riggs blog; another intern learned about facets of the work of the development office.

Weekly ‘Lunch and Learn’ sessions were presented by different departments about their functions. This included social work, therapeutic community and admissions staff; an overview of the Riggs care model; and an overview of the Riggs post-doctoral Fellowship program.

The interns came from several different colleges and universities throughout the United States. All psychology majors, the group had a range of diverse interests that they were able to explore while at Riggs. All interns were encouraged to reach out independently to staff members they wanted to meet. Intern Kate, with an interest in child development, spent time at the Nursery School, and intern Julienne, with an interest in art therapy, got a personal tour of the Lavender Door. Toward the end of the summer, all interns gave a brief five-slide, five-minute presentation in a forum that was very well attended by Riggs staff. This required both brevity and professionalism, but also gave each intern an opportunity to shine.

“The internship aims to offer insight into the workings of a psychiatric hospital from many angles,” said Dr. Hunter-Schaedle. “These interns are likely to take very different career paths from each other and hopefully their Riggs experience will help to inform this, as well as providing the interns with long-lasting professional connections with each other and with the staff they meet here.” The 2015 summer interns made a significant impact on the progress of Riggs research and in many ways broke ground in re-establishing infrastructure for the development of research projects. What was the secret to maintaining the interns’ level of enthusiasm? “A pipeline of projects to do and unlimited snacks and soda,” Dr. Hunter-Schaedle enthused with a twinkle in her eye. The Austen Riggs Center extends appreciation to the interns and Dr. Hunter-Schaedle for reclaiming this learning program.

More information about the internship program can be found online: www.austenriggs.org/research-internship.
A Search for Understanding
Through Journalism, Graphic Memoir and Psychobiography

“What we’re trying to do is really understand and ask a basic question, which is ‘What is it like to be you; what is it really like to be you?’” – Stephanie McCrummen

Each of the recipients of the 2015 Erikson Institute Prize for Excellence in Mental Health Media tell psychologically sophisticated stories. Using different methods and varied approaches, each is searching for an understanding that eludes cursory glances and evokes a thoughtful engagement from the reader. The prize winners spoke of this exploration to a room of nearly 100 attentive listeners at the 6th annual Erikson Institute Media Colloquy held in their honor and hosted by the Erikson Institute of the Austen Riggs Center.

Understanding ourselves and others is daunting and made more complicated by mental illness, trauma and other life experiences, as each of the Erikson Prize winners noted in their talks. Curator for the Media Colloquy and former Erikson Scholar Joshua Wolf Shenk spoke of McCrummen’s exploration of “dark nodes of suffering with an almost mythic purity,” Shultz’s discovery of “dark patches of earth underneath rocks that he has turned over” and Bechdel’s artful delivery of “unexpected connections” and regard for “not just what happened, but what it means.”

Stephanie McCrummen, a member of the three-member National Enterprise Team at The Washington Post (headed by David Finkel, a 2014 Erikson Prize winner), divided her approach to journalism into what she called “external reporting and internal reporting.” The external parts are derived from absorbing and recording “seemingly meaningless details … that acquire a meaning” over time, while the internal parts are gathered from extensive conversations with the subject(s). None of this could be accomplished without the somewhat unique “immersion reporting” technique her team employs. She described it by stating, “we try to follow our subjects in their lives as their lives are unfolding and in that way hopefully over time some kind of larger truth will emerge.” Her goal then becomes to join the external and internal to create a cohesive narrative that answers the animating question she initially posed: “What is it like to be you; what is it really like to be you?”

A psychobiographer who has written about Truman Capote, Diane Arbus and Elliot Smith, William Todd Schultz, PhD, like McCrummen, is interested in the question of knowing and understanding someone. He explained his craft and approach in this way: “you’re gathering together scientific findings and concepts that have been generated, mostly within personality science, personality research … and then you’re aiming them at one individual person and asking yourself what kind of light they might shed on this one person.” Shultz emphasized that he is not interested in psychoanalyzing his subjects; on the contrary, he uses psychodynamic principles to illuminate something about their lives that might not be obvious from their superficial history and explores what it means. Schultz utilizes three broad levels of interpretation to understand subjects of his work: “The Big Five” traits of openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion and neuroticism; characteristic adaptations or concrete behavioral expressions of the traits that are more situational; and stories, or “how people create scripts that allow them to narrate their lives.” While individual traits provide an opening to understanding, Shultz remarked, “Life … is like soft collisions with other people; life is all about relationships.” Without other people, we cannot be understood.

“I’m not asking ‘what is it like to be you?’ I’m asking ‘what is it like to be me?’” is how Alison Bechdel opened her description of her work, as “a cartoonist, a writer.” It was this abiding need to know and see herself that initially led her to create the landmark comic Dykes to Watch Out For. As she explains, “I didn’t see reflections in the culture of women who looked like me and my friends … and I was aware of craving that, of needing to see an accurate reflection of myself, so I decided I would make it myself.” The death of her father and her own depression led her to write the illustrated memoir Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic (the Broadway adaptation of which won five Tony Awards, including Best Musical). She then developed an interest in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis (particularly Winnicott), which led to a second illustrated memoir, Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama, about which she said, “I wanted to figure it out…not just why therapy worked for me, but how therapy works. … I’m so interested in psychoanalytic ideas, but I want to make them accessible; I want to show how they manifest in the concrete realm of my own life.”

Director of the Erikson Institute Jane G. Tillman, PhD, provided context and meaning for this event in her remarks, “Why is this important? Mental health issues are fraught with stigma, misunderstanding, misinformation and other significant challenges of policy and healthcare delivery. Our prize winners have a significant voice in the world and shape the perspective of the public on the nuanced and complex world of the inner life of human beings.” Trying to understand the inner lives of the self is a human endeavor, the benefits of which can give meaning not only to our own lives, but the lives of others as well.
addition, he remarked on the “importance of the [Riggs] research interns” to him and his work. “Their work, in both thinking about this project and assisting with research has been very helpful.”

Informal conversations and more formal settings like the Case Conference have given Dr. Xenakis a window into the enduring presence of psychoanalytic thought and language at Riggs – he said, “I started this work [psychoanalytic training] in the 1970s and there are times that I hear what I heard then, but I can also identify how things have changed.” He went on to say, “I’ve been impressed with the very humanistic, truly empathic way staff work with patients and the overall culture at Riggs.”

Medical Director/CEO Andrew J. Gerber, MD, PhD, noted, “While the treatment model at Riggs is unique and unlike any other in this country, we do not exist in a vacuum; there are important and vital conversations and research going on all around us in the world of mental health. The Erikson Scholar program is one way we seek to join the larger community as both learners and also teachers. We are remarkably fortunate to have hosted such varied and distinguished scholars, a tradition that continues with Dr. Xenakis’ residence at Riggs this summer.”

Annual Erikson Lecture at Yale

In 2009, the Yale Child Study Center established the Annual Erikson Lecture to highlight the clinical learning and research findings that emerge from the work at the Austen Riggs Center and in the Erikson Institute. Each year, a member of the Riggs therapy staff is selected to deliver the lecture at the Yale Child Study Center. This year, the lecture, Narrative Coherence and Disruption in Psychotherapy Progress and Outcome, was given on Tuesday, May 19, by Spencer Biel, PsyD.

Yale-Riggs Conference Series:

THE SCIENCE AND PRACTICE OF CHANGE

The fourth annual conference collaboration between the Yale Child Study Center and the Austen Riggs Center was held at Yale this past June. The conference featured both Yale and Riggs clinicians and researchers presenting on a variety of topics thematically linked through the definition and documentation of clinical outcomes occurring in response to psychotherapy and other psychosocial interventions. The presentations discussed treatment experiences delivered in public and private settings. Focus revolved around concepts such as common factors, critical developmental periods, the nature of change, creating new narratives and changing. Much attention was given to the questions: what is meaningful change and how do we describe or measure change?