

## Meet Lara A Ray, Ph.D.



Lara A. Ray, Ph.D., ABPP, is an associate professor in the department of psychology and the Brain Research Institute at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). Dr. Ray recently won the 2014 RSA Young Investigator Award, presented at the Research Society on Alcoholism's (RSA) annual meeting in Bellevue, Washington during June 2014.

*Writer Sherry Wasilow interviewed Dr. Ray from her office at UCLA.*

### **SW: How would you describe your current research focus?**

**LAR:** My research focuses on what causes one to become dependent on alcohol, and also on developing treatments that are more effective at helping patients recover. I am especially interested in applying insights from animal models to clinical populations, and vice-versa, so that we can develop a more complete understanding of alcoholism as a brain disorder and in turn refine treatment options.

### **SW: How did you begin your work in the field of alcohol studies?**

**LAR:** My first exposure to the field of alcoholism research was as a research assistant with the Consortium on Genetics of Alcoholism (COGA) (<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/research/major-initiatives/collaborative-studies-genetics-alcoholism-coga-study>). It was such an amazing opportunity to be able to conduct clinical interviews with patients suffering from alcoholism and their families. It gave me great respect for the wide range of consequences associated with this disorder and solidified my commitment to studying alcoholism during my doctorate. I have been fortunate to have wonderful mentors along the way, including senior scientists in the field who have provided informal mentoring and support at research meetings and beyond. I am most indebted to my graduate advisor, Dr. Kent Hutchison, who shared his passion for studying alcoholism and

taught me the importance of “asking big questions” so that we can have a real impact in the field and ultimately use our research to improve lives.

**SW: What have you gained personally from your research?**

**LAR:** In addition to the initial exposure to families affected by alcoholism, I have been fortunate to see many more individuals and families during my clinical training and in my professional life. It is critical to me that I stay connected with clinical care as I continue to learn a great deal about the disorder from my patients. I also learn a lot about the realities of implementing research into clinical practice. I am so thankful for the opportunity to enter patients’ lives and to help them in their recovery journey, it is a great privilege to do that and it keeps me committed to addiction research and practice.

**SW: What day-to-day applications do you think your research has for both clinicians and non-clinicians?**

**LAR:** I hope that my research leads to direct clinical benefits. I have been actively involved in personalizing the use of naltrexone for alcoholism by using gene markers that may identify treatment responders. I am also active in medications development and my research helps elucidate the mechanisms by which treatments work. My recent work also focuses on understanding alcoholism as a progressive disorder given that the factors that lead a patient to start drinking may not be the same that help maintain drinking for long periods of time. Ultimately, I would like to contribute to the development of treatment models that are science-based and that include effective medications as well as behavioral therapies that more fully capture alcoholism as a brain disorder.

**SW: What would you like to see happen in the addiction-research field?**

**LAR:** I would love to see more patients receiving evidence-based treatments. It is so sad to me that families spend so much time and resources in treatment settings that are not backed up by science. We can do better to disseminate scientific findings so that consumers can access better healthcare options and can benefit from all the advances afforded by government-funded research.

**SW: What advice do you have for people now entering addiction research?**

**LAR:** I would say that you should not be afraid to ask the big questions and that we should keep each other accountable to do research that has a high potential to improve clinical care for this devastating disorder. Lots of things are interesting to scientists but not all of these things can help patients and we need to do more of the latter.

**SW: What does your recent award – the 2014 RSA Young Investigator Award – mean to you on a personal level?**

**LAR:** I will choose to focus on the “young” part of the award and say that this is a beginning. I feel that my career is very much in its beginning stages and I am committed to making significant contributions to the field. Personally, it means a lot to me to receive this award from my peers who I deeply respect. But as patients serve to remind me every week, they do not care how many titles or awards I have, they want to get better from alcoholism and that is ultimately my job as a clinician and as a scientist.

**SW: Any last words for the ATTC audience?**

**LAR:** I want to share my enthusiasm for the ongoing research that is supported by NIAAA/NIDA and say that I am honored to be part of an energetic and committed group of scientists who is making strides to improve healthcare for addiction.

Website(s): <http://addictions.psych.ucla.edu>

**QUOTES:**

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