

FCC TASKFORCE AND THE NEXT GENERATION OF GRAVENS CONFERENCE ATTENDEES

The Family-Centered Care Taskforce was thrilled to support **five neonatal fellows in attending the 38th International Gravens Conference** as FCC Scholars! Gravens Conference is where the FCC Taskforce was founded by Malathi Balasundaram, MD, and the event has deeply impacted the way she cares for NICU babies and their families since she began regularly attending in 2019 as an early career faculty. She felt inspired to provide the same opportunity for impact on the next generation of neonatologists and created **FCC Scholars**.

After securing funding for this opportunity through a **Chiesi USA Independent Educational Grant** and advertising FCC Scholars with our membership and organizational partners including TECaN (Trainees and Early Career Neontologists), the FCC Taskforce received 24 outstanding applications from fellows across the U.S. and Canada. Roughly 29% of applicants were first-year fellows, 50% were second-year fellows, and 21% were third-year fellows. Questions asked of applicants included 1) Share how you prioritize family inclusion in neonatal care and your aspirations to incorporate FCC into your long-term care: 2) How do you embody the core values of FCC (information-sharing, dignity & respect, participation, and collaboration) into your daily interactions with families? 3) What do you most want to learn about FCC and how will this knowledge impact the way you care for families? and 4) Why are Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging important in your practice as a neonatologist? How do you see its impact on families in your daily practice? The Taskforce created an FCC Scholars Selection Committee comprised of healthcare professionals and family partners to read each of the 24 deidentified applications and used a scoring system to select the top five strongest applicants. Those individuals are 3rd year fellow **Cameron N. Boyd, MD** of Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, 1st year fellow **Emily Chi, MD** of Oregon Health & Science University, 1st year fellow **Caitlin Duncan, MD** of Boston Children's Hospital, 2nd year fellow **Dhwani Oza, MD** of University of Texas at Austin's Dell Medical School, and 2nd year fellow **James Rohwer, MD** of University of Texas' Southwestern Medical Center.

As FCC Scholars, Cameron, Emily, Caitlin, Dhwani, and James were supported financially for their conference registration and travel expenses, and attended a celebratory dinner with FCC Taskforce leadership and members of the Gravens Conference Planning Committee during the week of the event. The following are their takeaways from their first-ever Gravens experience:

"The 38th Annual Gravens Conference was a career-defining experience for me. As a first-time attendee, I didn't fully appreciate the conference's rich history and core mission of advancing support for all NICU families. The opportunity to connect with fellows, attendings, and professionals across disciplines, all dedicated to improving NICU care, was incredibly inspiring. The most impactful moments came from **hearing the lived experiences of NICU parents, particularly mothers who -often felt restricted by medical protocols, interventions, and testing that limited their ability to care for their babies.**

One key takeaway was the **need to rethink how and when neonatal teams engage with infants**, especially in the context of holding, caregiving interactions, and skin-to-skin care—which should be

treated as a medical priority rather than an optional bonding activity. Logistical barriers, rigid schedules, and missed opportunities for parental involvement too often limit access, emphasizing the need for improved communication and a stronger focus on family-centered care. However, one notable gap in the discussions was the lack of focus on fathers, whose voices and unique challenges remain underrepresented. Moving forward, I will continue to **advocate for father-inclusive programming, increased skin-to-skin opportunities, and the recognition of dads and non-birthing parents as equal partners in care.** By prioritizing both parents and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, we can create a more inclusive, supportive, and developmentally appropriate NICU environment—one that truly meets the needs of every person in each family. Thank you, Gravens Community!" -Cameron N. Boyd, MD



Cameron N. Boyd, MD
Northwestern University,
Feinberg School of Medicine
3rd Year Fellow

"I am deeply grateful to have been selected as an FCC Scholar and to have had the opportunity to attend the 38th International GRAVENS Conference. Over four days of impactful sessions, I gained valuable insights from outstanding speakers on making NICU care more family-centered. One key thought stands out: many routine NICU practices persist simply because "that's just the way things have always been done" (I'm looking at you, morning labs and scheduled touch times). But the parents and professionals at the GRAVENS Conference—whom I would affectionately describe as the kindest, gentlest disruptors of the system I've ever encountered, and among whom I felt right at home—showed me that **we can and should challenge these norms to truly place the health and well-being of infants and their families at the center of all we do.**



James Rohwer, MD
University of Texas,
Southwestern Medical Center
2nd Year Fellow

In his workshop Finding Your Ikigai (Reason for Being): Intersection of Love, Skills, Needs, and Compensation, Dr. Erick Ridout emphasized the importance of identifying the why behind our work. So, what is my why? I believe all children deserve every opportunity to develop and thrive and that society—especially those of us who have been granted more opportunities than others—has a responsibility to support them and the parents who love them in their pursuit of this ideal. As we work to improve the NICU environment, **let's also examine the broader systems we navigate—locally, nationally, and globally—to identify other areas in need of reform for the betterment of children and their families.** A heartfelt thank you to the inspiring parents who selflessly shared their stories and to the FCC Taskforce and FCC Scholars Selection Committee for this incredible opportunity. I look forward to many more years of learning and collaboration." -James Rohwer, MD

"Attending the Gravens Conference this year as an FCC scholar was both an honor and a privilege. **I was deeply moved by the powerful stories of bravery, resilience, and grief shared by NICU parents, which shed light on the profound impact of traumatic stress on NICU families.** Their experiences and lessons will stay with me as I continue working to create a safe, inclusive, and supportive space for these families.

This conference broadened my perspective on how we can more effectively engage with and empower NICU families. It **reinforced the importance of using**



Emily Chi, MD
Oregon Health
& Science University
1st Year Fellow

inclusive language to better support underserved and non-English-speaking families, as well as implementing universal screening for social determinants of health. Additionally, I learned new and innovative strategies to optimize neonatal pain management, minimize sleep disruptions, and personalize feeding plans. The experience strengthened my commitment to fostering an environment where families feel heard, respected, and meaningfully supported." -Emily Chi, MD

"Thinking back now, I am struck by strategies proposed to morph the ICU experience of critically ill babies toward a more typical infant experience. I've continued to think about ideas such as limiting painful stimulation to when parents are present to soothe their baby and dividing expressed breast milk by time of day of expression to match its circadian rhythm. But more importantly, the **stories from parents reminded me that we must first ensure that families are part of the standard of care we would expect.** For instance, all parents should be offered early, frequent kangaroo care and treated courteously by all team members. As much as I would like to introduce cutting-edge ideas to optimizing the developmental experience of the NICU, **the first principle should always be to bring parents to bedside for the primary role of caregiver, no matter how sick a baby may be.** Attending the Gravens conference has made me reckon with both the NICU that I envision for the future as well as the true state of NICU care today. Overall, this experience reaffirmed my passion for neonatal care and will empower me to take concrete steps toward fostering an environment where families feel truly supported during one of the most challenging times in their lives." -Caitlin Duncan, MD



Caitlin Duncan, MD
Boston Children's Hospital
1st Year Fellow



Dhwani Oza, MD
University of Texas at Austin,
Dell Medical School
2nd Year Fellow

"It was a privilege to attend Graven's Conference and gain a fresh perspective on the needs of neonates from a different lens. A home is built on trust, and for many babies the NICU serves as their first home. **As providers, it is crucial that we are mindful of the purpose behind every action we take.** Why are labs drawn in the early hours of the morning? What steps are we taking to minimize the negative associations that can arise from procedures? **We must rely on the families of these infants to guide us in how to treat their loved ones with compassion and care in this first home.** The conversations at the conference also set in motion the need to create programs that prepare families for the transition home, to help them feel confident and capable as they take on the responsibility of caring for their baby outside the hospital." -Dhwani Oza, MD

A huge thank you to Cheisi USA for their Independent Educational Grant, and to Loma Linda Publishing Company, our partner in receiving funding to support this initiative, for making FCC Scholars possible. It's an honor to play a small role in championing the next generation of Gravens Conference attendees and are excited to watch the impact the event has on the future of care for high-risk infants and their families unfold.

Thank you to our FCC Scholars Selection Committee for your time and effort in supporting this initiative:



Bob Cicco, MD



Jess Daigle, MD



Colby Day, MD



Morgan Kowalski



Mia Malcolm



Necole McRae



Ashley Omwando

The Family-Centered Care Taskforce recognizes that family partner attendees are financially responsible for their own conference registration and travel expenses, even despite the vital role they play in making Gravens Conference impactful and inspiring to all who attend. With restrictions around using educational grants to support family partner travel, we created **The Michael Hynan Fund, initiated by Michael Hynan, PhD**, where we are accepting tax-deductible donations to cover **registration and travel expenses for family partners**. If you'd like to contribute to this important initiative, please email us at FamilyCenteredCareTaskforce@gmail.com.



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