

Meet the NPF Researcher: Dr. Anhar Hassan



Dr. Hassan, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, MN

Call them the fortunate few, the 200 or so people living with Parkinson's who live full and active lives 20 years after their diagnosis. And they're not just surviving—they're mentally sharp, living at home and physically active. Though they're not symptom-free, they are holding their own against Parkinson's.

Although most Parkinson's specialists see only one or two of those patients, across the NPF Centers of Excellence about one hundred patients report similar experiences and another hundred who, while slowing down, are still doing well.

In 2012, neurologist Anhar Hassan, MB, BCh, then a movement disorder fellow at NPF's Center of Excellence at the University of Florida, was intrigued by the phenomenon.

"What makes people thrive even 20 years after a diagnosis of Parkinson's?" she asked. She decided to find out.

"In the past, these patients haven't been well studied, certainly not in large numbers, so we wanted to first describe their characteristics, and second see if there were any special needs that might improve their quality of life," she said.

Looking at data from NPF's *Parkinson's Outcomes Project*, the largest ongoing clinical study of Parkinson's patients to date, Dr. Hassan and colleagues identified 187 individuals who had been living with Parkinson's for 20 years or longer.

They discovered that nearly all of these patients still lived at home, though most were dependent on a caregiver. Nearly half were still engaging in some form of physical activity and most suffered from only mild cognitive impairment. On average, these patients were diagnosed in their 40s and 50s.

The secret to their good fortune may offer clues for treatment of those less fortunate.

Dr. Hassan's research challenges the assumption that everyone diagnosed with Parkinson's will later develop dementia and need nursing home care. She pointed out that while this research describes only a sub-group of patients, and more research needs to be done, the findings are encouraging.

"NPF's Parkinson's Outcomes Project is very important because this study will follow PD patients over many years, and can help identify additional risk factors that affect longer survival and better outcomes, Dr. Hassan said."

The study revealed that impaired mobility was the principal impediment to quality of life for patients and social constraint was the biggest issue for caregivers. Ideally, clinicians will at some point be able to determine which treatment approaches will be best for each sub-group of Parkinson's patients and their caregivers.

"The tremendous amount of research going on now in Parkinson's is very encouraging," Dr. Hassan said. "There is an aspect of hope, of being able to improve the quality of patients' lives and improve their function as well."

Dr. Hassan was recently awarded the prestigious "Young Investigator Award" from the International Parkinson and Movement Disorder Society for this research. Previously she led other studies using NPF's *Parkinson's Outcomes Project*. One study characterized people with PD for 10 years or more; and another showed that PD patients who visit the ER or hospital have a higher risk of this occurring the following year.

"My research is inspired by my patients," Dr. Hassan said. "Parkinson's disease changes your identity; it's not like diabetes, for example, where you can hide it. I think Parkinson's patients and their families are remarkable in how they adapt and adjust to the diagnosis."

For more information about NPF's Parkinson's Outcomes Project, visit www.parkinson.org/outcomes.

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