

Medtronics Acceptance Speech

First and foremost, thank you to Medtronics and the Society for Women's Health Research for this incredible honor. It's especially meaningful for me to be back home to receive this award: I was born in Washington DC, played the flute in the DC Youth Orchestra, and began doing research at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda when I was just 15 years old.

So I have three take-home messages tonight, and in case your attention span is short like mine, here they are: first, biomedical research can make a huge difference in women's lives. Second, research requires a long-term investment, since one advance builds on another. And the third take-home message is this: the next time you're stuck in traffic on the Beltway, I'd like you to think about me. I'll explain that in a minute.

Lymphangiomyomatosis, or LAM, affects almost only young women. It can strike suddenly during pregnancy, and it is often fatal. My research group discovered that LAM is caused by mutations in genes that also cause an inherited disease, tuberous sclerosis. This discovery opened the floodgates of LAM research. Even for me, it's still hard to believe that progress has been so rapid – so here comes the Beltway part. I'm sure most of you have had the experience of being stuck on the Beltway for what seems like years, inching forward. Then suddenly, miraculously, the traffic clears, and you're moving smoothly. That's what LAM research has been like since the connection to tuberous sclerosis was found 7 years ago.

When you're having one of those magic moments when the traffic clears on the Beltway, you rarely find out why you started moving forward at that particular point. But with biomedical research, it's often not a mystery why major advances occur, because most advances build on earlier discoveries. Science and medicine are highly interconnecting, kind of like cities connected by highways. Major advances in LAM and tuberous sclerosis emerged from studies in fruit flies. And now, progress in LAM and tuberous sclerosis may help us understand disease like breast cancer and diabetes and even autism.

These connecting highways that "fast forward" health research are largely funded through the National Institutes of Health. My own research would simply not be possible without NIH funding. My research would also not be possible without a support team of mentors, colleagues, friends, and family. Here tonight I have my wonderful parents, Ann and Bill Petri, my fabulous husband Rob, my three amazing children, Jessica, Brian, and Michael, who have been hearing about my research their entire lives, and my older brother, Bill, also a physician scientist. Also here tonight are two of the most inspirational women I have ever known, Sue Byrnes and Dr. Vicky Whittemore. Sue Byrnes began the LAM Foundation when her daughter was diagnosed with LAM, and Vicky Whittemore became the scientific director of the Tuberous Sclerosis Alliance when her nephew was diagnosed with tuberous sclerosis.

Now I'm realistic enough to know that most of you had not heard of LAM or tuberous sclerosis before tonight, and they won't be the first thing you think of tomorrow morning. So I'll boil down my take home message to just one thing: the next time you're stuck in traffic – hopefully that won't be tonight - remember that research provides the highways and the road signs that lead to improved health for everyone.

And once again, thank you for this incredible honor! I'm very, very grateful.