Dr. Rebecca C. Thurston was elected as the 2019-2020 President of The North American Menopause Society (NAMS) during the Society’s 30th Annual Meeting held September 25-28, 2019, in Chicago, Illinois. Dr. Thurston succeeds Dr. James Liu as President and will serve a 1-year term.

Dr. Thurston is professor of psychiatry, psychology, epidemiology, and clinical and translational science, and she is director of the Women’s Biobehavioral Health Program at the University of Pittsburgh in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Dr. Thurston practices as a clinical health psychologist, specializing in the care of midlife women.

Dr. Thurston completed her PhD in clinical and health psychology at Duke University as a James B. Duke Fellow. Because her doctoral training was “bookended” by findings from major trials on hormone therapy and women’s cardiovascular health, she developed a passion for understanding menopause, hormones, and midlife women’s cardiovascular health early in her career.

Dr. Thurston completed her clinical internship at the University of Washington, where she refined her clinical skills in behavioral interventions to manage chronic health conditions. She subsequently received the Robert Wood Johnson Health and Society Scholars Fellowship at Harvard University. This experience provided her with an understanding of the broader social and contextual influences on women’s health. Dr. Thurston’s background provides her with a uniquely integrated, comprehensive perspective on women’s health, from biology to society.

Dr. Thurston went to the University of Pittsburgh in 2005 and established the Women’s Biobehavioral Health Laboratory. Since that time, she has been principal investigator of numerous large National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded studies of the menopause transition and women’s cardiovascular health. She also has served as an investigator with the Study of Women’s Health Across the Nation since 2005. She is internationally recognized for her research on menopause, hormones, and midlife women’s cardiovascular health.

“Rebecca has worked her way up to a well-funded independent investigator in menopause research with diligence, intention, and great adaptability,” says Dr. Nanette Santoro. “She began her independent research program with a large NIH training grant that combined her expertise in epidemiology and psychology with reproductive endocrinology, and she became a distance ‘student’ of mine as she taught herself, with some facilitation by me at monthly phone meetings, the Guide to Learning in Reproductive Endocrinology. This led me to see very early on what everyone else would eventually know: that Dr. Rebecca Thurston is a superstar in the field of menopause. The enhanced perspective she gained in her endocrine study has continued to inform her research and led her to select outstanding scientific collaborators and perform state-of-the-art science. Her work has gone on to reveal a strong relationship between menopause hot flashes and cardiovascular health. The linkages she found are novel and important. Rebecca has also grown into a primary stewardship role for the multicenter Study of Womens Health Across the Nation and is a major intellectual force at the Pittsburgh site.”

Dr. Thurston has authored more than 120 peer-reviewed publications and 100 additional reports, editorials, abstracts, and reviews. She has published groundbreaking work on the natural history of the menopause transition, on obesity and menopause, and on the implications of vasomotor symptoms and sleep problems for women’s cardiovascular disease risk. More recently, she has expanded her work to include menopause and women’s neurocognitive and cerebrovascular health and how trauma and sexual harassment can affect women’s cardiovascular health. Her research represents a unique multidisciplinary integration of epidemiologic studies, mechanistic research, and clinical intervention.

“Rebecca Thurston clearly stands out as an important leader in menopause for her contributions and her transformation of the field,” says Dr. Isaac Schiff, Editor-in-Chief of Menopause. “For example, most clinicians thought of hot flashes as isolated events that did not affect other body functions. She challenged that concept and showed a relationship between hot flashes and adiposity. She also discovered that childhood abuse can lead to increased reporting of hot flashes later in life. And she made the important observation that hot flashes can be associated with cardiovascular disease.”

In addition to her research, Dr. Thurston is deeply committed to the clinical care of midlife women. She is particularly
passionate about the integration of behavioral health care into medical care. As such, she has established a behavioral health service in the Women’s Midlife Health Center at the Magee Women’s Hospital of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, in collaboration with NAMS-certified gynecologists. This state-of-the-art clinic provides multidisciplinary care of women transitioning through the menopause.

“Dr. Thurston’s contribution to the field of menopause and behavioral health are innumerable and wide-ranging,” says Dr. Pauline Maki. “She has made fundamental advances in our understanding of the relationships between vasomotor symptoms and heart health, mental health and heart health, and vasomotor symptoms and sleep. As a behavioral health expert, her work addresses the health consequences of symptoms that are common in women but not commonly assessed in routine medical care. For example, her 2009 study showing loneliness as a predictor of incident coronary heart disease presaged the current focus on social connectedness and heart health. Her recent work on early life trauma as a predictor of later-life heart health has appropriately received considerable attention in the media and scientific community.”

Dr. Thurston is dedicated to mentoring and training the next generation of scholars. She mentors trainees at all levels, from undergraduate students to faculty, both locally and around the world. Dr. Thurston is a member of six NIH-funded training programs and a leader of the University of Pittsburgh’s Cardiovascular Behavioral Medicine training program. She has a particular commitment to training the next generation of menopause scholars and for 5 years chaired NAMS’ Mentorship Program.

Dr. Thurston has been active in NAMS since 2005. Her service to NAMS has included chairing the NAMS Research Affairs Committee, leading the Mentorship Program, and serving on numerous NAMS committees, including the Scientific Program Committee, the Awards Committee, and the Poster Award Panel. Dr. Thurston is a member of the Editorial Board of Menopause and is an associate editor of the 6th edition of Menopause Practice: A Clinician’s Guide. Dr. Thurston was elected to the Board of Trustees in 2016 and served as 2017-2018 Secretary.

“My priorities are two-fold,” says Dr. Thurston. “First, through my clinical activities, I understand the importance of behavioral health in midlife women, both with respect to treating mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as for health behavior change, such as for weight management, smoking, and sleep. These behavioral health issues are often top priorities for midlife women, and behavioral health experts provide critical expertise in addressing them. Second, given the historic lack of attention to aging women’s health issues in research, I am committed to continued research attention to aging women’s health.”

“Rebecca brings a wealth of experience as a menopause researcher to the role of President at NAMS,” says Dr. Stephanie Faubion, NAMS Medical Director. “She has contributed substantially to our knowledge of vasomotor symptoms and their association with cardiovascular risk as well as psychosocial determinants of health such as adverse childhood experiences and trauma exposure. I look forward to partnering with her to improve the care of midlife women.”

Dr. Thurston plans to bring awareness of and resources concerning behavioral health to the NAMS membership, and she plans to continue NAMS’ excellent tradition of empirically supported treatment guidelines and initiatives to disseminate late-breaking menopause-related research findings to the NAMS community.

Dr. Thurston has received numerous awards for her work, including The North American Menopause Society/Duramed Pharmaceutical’s Vasomotor Symptoms Award and the International Menopause Society’s Henry Burger Award for the most significant contributions to the science of menopause internationally. She is an elected member of the Academy of Behavioral Medicine Research and presents her work around the world, including to bodies such as the National Institutes of Health and National Academy of Medicine. Her research is frequently featured in major news outlets, including the New York Times, JAMA Medical News, Rolling Stone, CNN, and the Washington Post.

“I love that my work takes me around the globe,” says Dr. Thurston, “and I am a frequent traveler to lands far and wide. When I’m home, I try to practice what I preach and can be found hiking or biking in the vast Pittsburgh urban forests, training at the gym, or cross-country skiing. I’m a long-term meditator and a certified yoga teacher. I look forward to bringing my commitment to healthy aging to my role as President of NAMS.”

The editors