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With our donors' generous support, last year, NVA awarded a pilot research grant to [Denniz Zolnoun, MD](#) (pictured on left), assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology and director of the Vulvar Pain Clinic, and [Andrea Neely, PhD](#), assistant professor of pharmacology, both of the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill (UNC), to investigate underlying mechanisms in vulvodynia and temporomandibular disorders (TMD). Testing the theory that vulvodynia and TMD share common central pathophysiology, they are comparing pain sensitivity and circulating cytokines (substances released by immune system cells) in four groups: women with vulvodynia, women with TMD, women with concurrent vulvodynia/TMD and healthy controls. This study aims to provide: (i) a better understanding of the key mechanisms that drive vulvodynia and TMD, (ii) more accurate differentiation of distinct subgroups of vulvodynia and TMD patients, and (iii) the development of new therapeutic strategies tailored to these subgroups.

The importance of your support cannot be emphasized enough! It enables the NVA to [fund vital pilot studies](#), thereby equipping researchers to secure multi-million dollar grants from the NIH and other institutions. Please help the NVA continue to fund these vital studies by [making a tax-deductible donation today](#). Thank you!

In fall 2009, Dr. Zolnoun included preliminary data from the above study in an application to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and in April 2010, the NIH announced she would receive a grant to study [Central and Peripheral Mechanisms of Persistent Pain in Vulvar Vestibulitis Syndrome](#) (aka *Provoked Vestibulodynia or PVD*). Zolnoun's current study is one part of a five-year project titled, [Complex Persistent Pain Conditions: Common and Unique Pathways of Vulnerability](#), conducted by [Dr. William Maixner](#), director of the [UNC Center for Neurosensory Disorders](#). Zolnoun and colleagues will expand upon the NVA-funded project to identify both shared and unique biological, genetic, and psychosocial factors associated with the development and maintenance of five chronic pain conditions: PVD, TMD, fibromyalgia, headache and irritable bowel syndrome. In an effort to identify subgroups of patients with persistent pain conditions, they will recruit 1,500 patients that meet examination-based case definitions for one or more of these disorders and compare vulvar skin and pelvic floor muscle pain sensitivity, central nervous system pain processing mechanisms and genetic variations in cases and controls.

NVA's Executive Board recently approved funding for the first large-scale study investigating the underlying mechanisms of **Generalized Vulvodynia**, to be conducted by Dr. Zolnoun and her colleague, [Mark Tommerdahl, PhD](#), associate professor of biomedical engineering at UNC. We will include a thorough summary of this study in the winter issue of *NVA News*. In brief, Drs. Tommerdahl and Zolnoun will compare peripheral and central nervous system pain processing among women with Generalized Vulvodynia, Provoked Vestibulodynia and both vulvodynia subtypes. Understanding the mechanisms that initiate and maintain abnormal pain processing at all levels of the nervous system - the brain, spinal cord and peripheral nerves - will help to determine which therapeutic agents are likely to be effective in the treatment of women with Generalized Vulvodynia. They will include data from this study in an application to the NIH and other federal agencies in 2011 to secure large-scale funding to continue their work.