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Yvette Blanchard, Sacred Heart University

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Talk to the faculty at any university and you will hear what an awesome responsibility it is to shape young minds. There are only a handful, however, who can claim to shape some of the youngest minds on the planet.

Professor Yvette Blanchard – Sacred Heart University’s most recent Fulbright Specialist recipient – can make those claims. Specializing in neurobehavioural assessment, Blanchard, who teaches in the physical therapy program at SHU, is quite literally a mind reader – working with premature and high-risk infants.

Through modern medicine, a child born prematurely has a reasonable chance of survival – even arriving as much as four months early. One challenge that comes with this, however, is that their brains don’t develop in the peaceful cocoon of the mother’s womb, but rather amid the over-stimulated environment of a hospital unit with bright lights and whirring machines working to keep the infant alive.

When she started her work 25 years ago, Blanchard explains, “premature babies were pinned down to the mattress with diaper safety pins, staring at bright fluorescent lights 24 hours a day. I knew there had to be a better way.” Through her expertise in neurobehavioural assessment – researching how infants communicate their needs through behavior – Blanchard works to educate doctors and clinical staff to recognize those needs and respond to them.

Her impact does not end there, however. The next challenge comes as the infant’s parents, who have felt sidelined while the medical needs of the child were attended to, begin to assume responsibility of care. “It can be terribly stressful for new parents going home with a baby they feel they barely know and whose needs they feel they barely understand,” Blanchard says. Using
her relationship-based approach to therapy, she teaches the clinical staff how to bring the parents into the fold to foster that parent-child relationship.

In addition to ‘preemies’, Blanchard works with the medical staff and families of infants who have genetic conditions or disorders, as well as children with cardiac defects, typically zero-to-three years of age with a focus on the first three months of life.

Known internationally for her work in the field, Blanchard’s Fulbright Specialist Award will allow her to travel to Norway twice over the next academic year to the University of Tromsø, where she will present lectures to undergraduates and medical students. Additionally, she will serve as a mentor to their faculty and help to develop academic curricula and educational materials.

Blanchard also serves on the faculty at the Brazelton Institute, Children’s Hospital, Boston. Four times a week she commutes to Sacred Heart’s campus in Fairfield, citing a love of problem-based learning and an appreciation of the University’s respect for its faculty’s ‘real world’ responsibilities that gives students opportunities to work not only with academics, but practitioners.

Blanchard is one of only nine physical therapists to be awarded a Fulbright. Hers is the fifth Fulbright awarded at the University in the past seven years and the second awarded in this year alone.