

A&M researcher studies hazards

Effect of diving on fetuses studied

ports of birth defects among children of women scuba divers have triggered a Texas A&M University biologist to study the potential dangers of "bends" to the fetus, especially in early stages of pregnancy.

Biologist William Fife says recent medical surveys show four major birth defects among babies of 25 men who dived deeper than 100 feet, while pregnant, an alarm rate of 16 percent.

The total number of birth defects was still more than 6 percent when adjusted to the entire group of pregnant divers studied, about 200.

As a result, Fife and his team of researchers at Texas A&M have changed the emphasis of hyperbaric (high pressure chamber) studies here, going into high gear to gather information on hazards of scuba diving to the unborn child.

"We know the bends are a greater risk to the fetus than to the mother,"

says Fife. "Deep diving could kill the baby in the womb or cause malformation without the other ever knowing it."

Under a \$5,000 supplemental grant just received from Texas A&M's Sea Grant College Program, the group has expanded its studies with sheep, which have placental blood systems very close to that of humans.

Results could affect an estimated 200,000 certified women scuba divers already in the United States, along with the approximately 20,000 women divers who join those ranks annually. Of the total, about 2,000 are instructors and another 200 to 250 are scientific or commercial divers who also don tanks on a regular basis, sometimes for dives more than 100 feet.

Originally funded by Sea Grant to develop more accurate diving tables that take both men and women into account, Fife has convinced others of the importance of research to find answers to questions about pregnant divers.

The lack of knowledge about diving's effects on the unborn and the conclusions of the birth defect study have prompted the Underwater Medical Society, of which Fife is a member, to recommend that all women who are pregnant or even

think they are pregnant not dive at all until some questions are deciphered.

In the research, Fife and Texas A&M students will subject sheep to simulated dives in pressure chambers at the university's hyperbaric lab in order to recreate dives which may result in bends in the fetus.

They will now try to zero in on fetuses in the first trimester of development, he explains, although the study will include sheep near the end of pregnancy to augment other work carried out last year.

"The early stages are, of course, when many women might not know they are pregnant and are still diving," notes Fife.

"More important, we just don't know the answer to some questions. For example, we know that the mother's diving in the third trimester increases the workload on the baby's heart, but we don't know if that is bad for a short time."

"We also know that the uterine artery reduces the blood flow during a dive to protect the baby from too much oxygen, but we don't know if the resulting buildup of carbon dioxide is harmful."

"In adults, this buildup makes them more predisposed to get the bends," continues Fife.

"If bubbles develop in the early

embryo, it is highly possible they could damage one or two cells that eventually would have developed into major portions of the brain or another vital organ. The missing hand on one of the four babies may have been caused this way."

He says no long-term data exist, and it might take thousands of human cases to establish concrete facts on the possible ills. Basic research now being carried out with animals may save families much grief.

Tournaments at A&M

- Pool
- Skateboarding
- Bridge
- Ping Pong

If you are interested in planning and/or participating, come to room 140 MSC on Thursday at 3:30 p.m.

MSC SUMMER PROGRAMMING COMMITTEE

what's up

Thursday

MOVIE: "Carrie," starring Cissy Spacek, will be shown at 8:45 p.m. in the Grove Theater. (R).

COWBOY KELLY ART EXHIBIT RECEPTION: Will be held from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. in the MSC Gallery.

Friday

MOVIE: "Annie Hall," starring Diane Keaton and Woody Allen, will be shown at 8:45 p.m. in the Grove Theater. (PG).

MIDNIGHT MOVIE: "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" will be shown in the Grove. (PG).

APPRENTICESHIP TRAINING PROGRAM: The Physical Plant Department of Texas A&M is accepting applications for the 1979 apprenticeship training program which offers training for carpenters, electricians, air conditioning and heating mechanics, electronic technicians, plumbers, sheetmetal works, painters and automotive mechanics. Interested persons should contact the Physical Plant.

GRADUATING SENIORS: Graduation announcements can be ordered through e 15 in Room 217, MSC between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. weekdays.

Saturday

MOVIE: "Fun With Dick and Jane," will be shown at 8:45 p.m. in the Grove Theater. (PG).

Sunday

MOVIE: "The Three Musketeers," will be shown at 8:45 p.m. in the Grove Theater. (PG).

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