

Area doctors fear diet drug may be overprescribed

By ERICA ROY
 THE BATTALION

The Mayo Clinic's warning Tuesday that "fen-phen" may cause heart and lung damage added to concerns of some College Station health professionals who say the diet-drug combination is overprescribed.

Last year in the United States, 18 million people were prescribed fen-phen, a combination of the medications fenfluramine and phentermine that helps produce weight loss. About 60 million Americans are considered obese.

Pharmacist Shannon Griggs, pharmacy manager for the Wal-Mart Supercenter in Bryan, said that 30 percent of the prescriptions that Wal-Mart fills every day is diet medications, including fen-phen.

Griggs said that although fen-phen can be a good drug for some people, it is too heavily relied upon by the health community.

"Fen-phen was overused," she said. "It should only be used in cases where it's a health condition."

Griggs also said she has seen fen-phen prescribed to people who are not extremely obese.

"Every person coming off the street is getting it," she said.

Dr. Michael Ruggiero, D.O., an A&M clinical assistant professor of community and family medicine and a private prac-

itioner, said fen-phen should be prescribed when a person has a body mass index of 37 or greater, which is about 50-75 pounds overweight, and after medical causes of obesity have been ruled out.

He also said the drug combination is only one part of a weight loss regimen that includes counseling, diet and exercise.

Ruggiero said the Mayo Clinic study is preliminary, and although it will not change doctor's prescribing habits, it will increase the number of routine health screenings on the patients who use fen-phen.

"It's not going to stop me from using the regimen," he said. "It's going to make me a little more cautious in who I use it on."

He also said that although the study is not definitive, it does prove that more investigation of the medication is needed.

Dr. Don Freeman, M.D., a physician at the A.P. Beutel Health Center, said that none of the Beutel physicians prescribe fen-phen.

"We really don't think that's the answer for most people," Freeman said.

He said weight loss drugs are used as a "quick fix," and should only be used for people who are extremely overweight. People can lose weight more effectively through changing eating habits and exercise regimens, he said.

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Study relates 'fen-phen' to heart, lung problems

ROCHESTER, Minn. (AP) — A diet-drug combination that is known as "fen-phen" and is taken by millions of Americans may cause serious heart and lung damage, the Mayo Clinic and the government warned Tuesday.

The Food and Drug Administration began sending letters to thousands of doctors asking them to immediately check fen-phen patients for valve problems and report them to the agency.

The FDA, which wasn't connected to the Mayo Clinic study but independently reviewed the findings, stopped short of recommending that people stop taking the drugs but urged doctors and patients to be "very careful."

Manufacturers of the drug said the research

was inconclusive, and the president of the American Obesity Association complained that the study may panic thousands of fen-phen users.

He said it is possible that simply being obese predisposes people to heart valve problems.

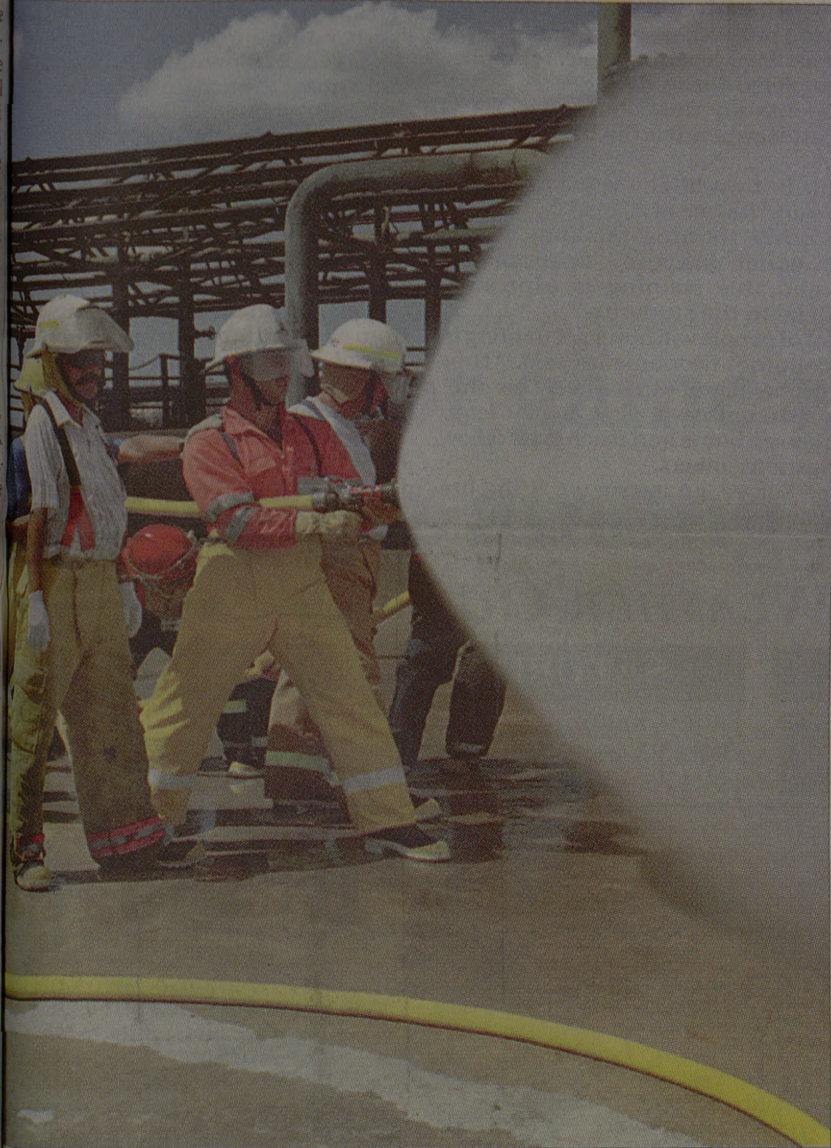
"We will be doing a major disservice to the obese people of this country if this is a false alarm," said Dr. Richard Atkinson of the University of Wisconsin, who has prescribed fen-phen to over 300 patients.

"If it is not a false alarm, it should serve to alert physicians that they shouldn't be slapping people who have five to 10 pounds to lose ... on drugs."

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Fire school hosts classes in Spanish

By MICHELLE NEWMAN
 THE BATTALION



PHOTOGRAPH: Sarah Johnson

Over 700 students are attending the 31st annual Spanish Fire School at Brayton Fire Field July 6-11.

This is the largest number of students ever enrolled at the school, which is geared toward Spanish-speaking students. Melba Lopez, registration clerk for the fire school, said the school draws from numerous parts of the world.

"Students come not only from the United States, but from all over the world," Lopez said. "There are students from Honduras, Brazil, Argentina, Spain, Mexico and several other Latin and Central American countries."

Jose R. Flores, a fire inspector for San Antonio, has worked with the Spanish Fire School for 20 years. Flores said a majority of the students are not full-time fire personnel.

"I'd venture to say about 90 percent [of the students] are not firefighters," Flores said. "Most of them are safety engineers in charge of fire protection in their respective industries and will bring information home to teach colleagues."

“Where else in the world can you go to bring 18 to 20 countries together to work with one language and be able to accomplish these courses?”

Johnny G. Economedas
 Spanish Fire School staff member

Johnny G. Economedas, a staff member of the Spanish Fire School, said a diverse number of professions are represented at the school.

"We have engineers, doctors, lawyers, and nurses here," Economedas said. "Doctors and nurses attend the school to learn about hazardous materials and to understand what firefighters go through. They also learn about treating people for burns."

Hazardous Materials I and II, Rescue, and Basic Fire Fighting are the classes taught at the school. Instruction begins at a basic level and progresses throughout the week. All classes are taught in Spanish.

"Where else in the world can you go to bring 18 to 20 countries together to work with one language and be able to accomplish these courses?" Economedas said.

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Rock gives hints of Earth-like Mars

Pathfinder found evidence that water was plentiful at time of planet's birth

PASADENA, Calif. (AP) — The first chemical analysis of a rock on Mars suggests the dusty world may have had abundant water at the time it formed — a vital requirement if the red planet was to develop life as Earth did.

Geologists already know that water once existed on Mars. On Monday, Pathfinder scientists presented evidence of massive floods 1 billion to 3 billion years ago. But the latest evidence hints that water may have existed there more than 4 billion years ago, the same era when life began on Earth.

The findings radioed to scientists from the Mars Pathfinder spacecraft and released Tuesday suggested the rock — a football-sized specimen nicknamed "Barnacle Bill" — may be andesite. That's a type of volcanic rock named for Earth's Andes Mountains, where it is common.

Such a rock could have been brought to the surface by volcanic activity or a meteorite impact.

It is too early to tell for certain

that Barnacle Bill is andesite. But because some types of the rock only form in the presence of water, the new results may eventually lead to the demonstration that early Mars had water in its interior, said Allan Treiman, a planetary scientist at the Lunar and Planetary Institute in Houston.

"It completely changes most people's views of Mars. Mars becomes a place that had water from the beginning and the water was very active in the planet," Treiman said in a telephone interview just as scientists were finishing a news conference at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

After the Sojourner rover spent 10 hours with a small instrument pressed up against Barnacle Bill, scientists said it appears to contain the mineral quartz.

"This is a real surprise. We were not expecting a rock of this composition," said Hap McSweeney, a University of Tennessee specialist in meteorites who is working with the Pathfinder team.

A&M students design drills to look for water under planet's surface

By JOHN LEBAS
 THE BATTALION

While NASA explores Mars' environment with the Sojourner rover, Texas A&M students and faculty are brainstorming ways to search for water below the planet's surface.

Dr. Aaron Cohen, chair of the Texas Space Grant Consortium and a professor in the mechanical engineering department, said senior mechanical engineering design students worked last semester on ideas on how to drill into Mars. A drill would be used to find water that may lie hidden underground. The classes will work on detailing their plans in the fall.

Cohen, who is a former director of the Johnson Space Center in Houston and a former deputy administrator of NASA, said finding water on or in Mars would be one of the most significant discoveries on the red planet.

"If [NASA] did find evidence of moisture or water, I think that would be just a phenomenal event," Cohen said. "If water does exist [on Mars], it will probably be below the surface."

When Cohen was with NASA, he said, the space agency did not do much research into Martian drilling. But representatives of both the Johnson Space Center and the Lunar Planetary Institute suggested such a project to Cohen following last year's possible fossil finding in a meteorite from Mars.

The ideas that the MEEN 445 and 446 students generated last spring impressed scientists at the Johnson center, Cohen said. This fall, the classes will try to come up with detailed plans for a drill based on these concepts.

"By the end of next semester, we'll know if we can [design a feasible drill] or not," Cohen said.

The students will be "designing to cost," Cohen said, meaning that a drill must be planned around size and transportation restrictions.

"We will have a robot that would drill on Mars up to two miles," Cohen said. This robot would have to be compact enough to fit on a rocket, limiting possibilities for design.

Cohen said the earliest a Mars drill could be ready for launch is probably about two years.

The students have received considerable help from the petroleum engineering department, Cohen said, and especially from Jerome Schubert, a lecturer and graduate student in petroleum engineering.

"We have the best petroleum engineering department in the country," he said. "Our best drillers are very interested in this project."

Cohen said Mars exploration should continue to stoke student interest in space discovery and technology.

"This actually stimulates students to see that it is real, because that is eventually what they want to do," he said.

TODAY IN BATTALION

SPORTS

Tyner and Casey Fossum living out their dreams the USA Baseball Team.

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OPINION

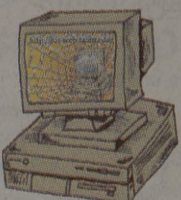
Space exploration deserves public support to continue its goal.

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ONLINE

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Weirus dies at age 76

Richard E. "Buck" Weirus, Class of '42, died of an aneurysm yesterday around noon at his College Station home at the age of 76.

Weirus was a former director of the Association of Former Students and a Texas A&M Distinguished Alumni. He is honored with the Buck Weirus Spirit Award, given annually to outstanding students.

Weirus is survived by his daughter, Dianna Burke, and her husband Ozzie Burke of Bryan.

Randy Matson, executive director of the Association of Former Students, reflected on his friendship with Weirus.

"I knew him well," Matson said. "He was a friend, a mentor and somebody I looked up to. He hired and brought me here. Without him I wouldn't be here today."

Funeral services have not been scheduled, but burial services will be held at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio. Weirus will be buried next to his wife.

Study finds tuition plans help upper classes more than poor

Texas Tomorrow Fund aids families in saving for college

AUSTIN (AP) — Funds that allow parents to pay for a child's future college education at today's prices tend to help families that could afford college anyway, while doing little to help the poor, a new analysis says.

A study by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities examined prepaid tuition plans in several of the 13 states that have such programs.

Texas is among the states offering contracts to families to save for college. But data from the Texas Tomorrow Fund was not cited in the study.

"Prepaid tuition plans ease college affordability concerns for participants — primarily middle- and upper-income families," the analysis said. "They are not a means for increasing access to higher education — especially for the neediest students — and do nothing to address the causes of rising college costs."

The results are not surprising, according to Texas officials.

The Texas Tomorrow Fund was set up to help middle-class families save for college, said Sheila Clancy, a spokeswoman for Texas Comp-

troller John Sharp, whose agency administers the program.

"Rich people don't have to worry about college, and lower-income people have numerous sources of income aid," Clancy said. "It's the middle-income people who have been falling through the cracks."

Larry Burt, director of financial aid at the University of Texas, said, however, that the amount of aid available to the needy is not sufficient to cover college expenses.

"The problem is, if you go away to college ... you've got to pay room and board, books, transportation and other costs," Burt said. "Those expenses can add up to much more than the grant funds I have available. Our needy students are still going to have to borrow a substantial amount of money."

The Texas Tomorrow Fund pays for tuition and fees.

The upside is, such programs spur middle-class people to save actively for college, possibly sooner than they would have, Burt said. There is a risk, however.

Taxpayers can get stuck covering a part of the cost if tuition and fees escalate higher than expected.