

Scientist George Preti sniffs out causes of odor-related diseases

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — George Preti approaches his patients sniffing. He snuffles under their armpits, takes deep whiffs of their necks and slowly sniffs up and down their bodies.

"Mmm-hmm," he says, jotting down notes. "OK, take a deep breath and exhale into my face."

Preti can get a good idea of what the problem is from using a single diagnostic instrument: his nose.

Preti, who counts himself among America's experts on body odor, is a specialist at the Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia, where more than

50 scientists focus their research exclusively on smell, taste and chemical irritation. The 31-year-old non-profit center is the only one of its kind in the nation.

And while the researchers' job duties at times border on the revolting, their work provides crucial information about disease, dangerous chemicals and food safety, Anita Pickus of the National Institutes of Health said.

"It's basic science that they're doing there," Pickus, senior adviser of the agency's Office of Rare Diseases, said. "To know what these simple mechanisms are,

to know how processes occur today, leads you to therapy in the future."

For many, the center's research is their only hope for a better life.

On a recent day, Sandy Gordon walked into Preti's office with three plastic containers filled with her urine. Afflicted with trimethylaminuria, a rare disease that can make a person smell like rotten fish, Gordon turned the samples in for tests.


"Dr. Preti was my last hope," she said. "When I found out what I had, I just broke down crying. I

came here thinking I was the only person with this problem. Now I know it's not something to be ashamed of."

For Preti to truly gauge human smell, patients stop wearing deodorant and perfumes five days before an exam. They also are told only to shower with unscented Ivory soap and to stop shaving armpits. The night before the exam, patients stop brushing their teeth.

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