

PEERing into youthful minds

By NONI SRIDHARA
The Battalion

A \$1.7 million grant from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) has been given to Texas A&M's Center for Environmental and Rural Health to begin a project called Partnership for Environmental Education and Rural Health (PEER), aimed at improving science education for middle school students in rural areas.

Larry Johnson, a professor of veterinary anatomy and public health, said in a press release that the program targets rural schools because they are less likely to receive current information on scientific subjects.

Johnson said these students need this type of education the most.

"There is an increased concern for environmentally related diseases in a rural setting, such as lead poisoning, birth defects and other conditions caused by exposure to chemicals," he said.

Johnson said for a long time he has been interested in promoting science among youth.

"I grew up on a farm, and ever since then, two of my childhood goals were to perform public work as a scientist and also to be an inventor," he said.

He said another reason for targeting this age range is because the highest dropout rate occurs

in the ninth grade in these underprivileged areas. "Prior to this time, the students are extremely malleable," Johnson said. "This is when we want to jump in and stimulate the students' interest in the biologically related fields."

Johnson said three main factors helping make this program effective—the faculty at the Center for Environmental Education and Rural Health, the College of Education and contacts with schools within the rural system initiative.

"The College of Education helps package the curricula in a way that is very palatable to the students," he said.

Johnson said faculty at the center ask heads of schools in rural areas, if they would like a scientist to make a presentation at the school.

Johnson said he fondly recalls his trip to Hereford in West Texas this week.

"In our center we have a lot of anatomical specimens, which makes the students' eyes open and jaws drop," he said.

To coordinate with Quit Smoking Week and teach the students that smoking is bad for their health, Johnson said he brought half a dead dog with a tumor. He said the dog looked like a regular dog until he turned it over and all the students stared in awe.

"This little blind girl came up to the front of the classroom, and she felt the tumor in the dog. I asked her to guess what it was, and she said it

was a tumor which was indicative of cancer," he said. "When I told her she was right, she had all the determination she needed and said she would go become a scientist to help treat animals and humans."

Johnson said the girl's statement shows the need for more programs to encourage science education.

Marisa Cervantes-Flores, a former teacher in the Rio Grande Valley and Class of '95, said although she has not seen a similar type of program, she feels would make the students more valuable to society.

"Many of these students do not feel they have the potential or opportunity to pursue jobs in the scientific field, so they just settle for blue-collar work and act satisfied with their positions," she said.

The majority of the presentations deal with environmental issues because the students sometimes live in polluted environments and can understand the importance of the situation better.

"There are many times when students want to jump out there and do calculations to solve water runoff problems or take on the role of a congressman to fix the state of their environment," Johnson said.

By the end of this year, Johnson and other Texas A&M professors will have spoken to more than 5,000 students.

Flu vaccines reach companies first

WASHINGTON (AP) — Dr. Raymond Scalettar is angry: He has to send elderly lung-disease patients to nearby supermarkets for a flu shot. Why? Some huge grocery chains received thousands of vaccine doses before manufacturers shipped them to many private doctors whose patients are so frail influenza could kill them.

The sick standing in store lines is not doctors' only frustration. Manufacturers acknowledge shipping shots to large corporations for employee-vaccination programs ahead of many doctors.

"We have patients on cancer chemotherapy, who have chronic bronchitis and obstructive lung disorder, and immunodeficiency — people who really need the protection as soon as possible," said Scalettar, a prominent Washington physician who eventually will get the vaccines but does not want his sickest patients to wait.

"It doesn't make sense for corporations to give it to healthy people and we can't give it to sick people."

Doctor after doctor reports being cornered by healthy 30-somethings demanding vaccination. Tempers flared at a recent South Carolina vaccine fair that temporarily ran out of

shots and turned away 100 people. Influenza is not threatening yet and plenty of doses are coming. Federal health officials are urg-

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— Raymond Scalettar
physician

ing healthy people to wait until late November for vaccination.

"We want to make sure that high-risk people get vaccinated first," stresses Dr. Keiji Fukuda of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Other people "are anxious, and we recognize that. But know that more vaccine is on the way and it's pretty quiet right now on the influenza front."

Contrary to earlier fears, the CDC insists there is no impending shortage. Some 75 million flu shots

ultimately will be distributed.

Typically, doctors finish vaccinating most high-risk patients, and lots of healthy people, by late October. This year, vaccine shipments only recently began and just two-thirds of doses will be sent out before December.

November or December is not too late to vaccinate healthy people, the CDC insists. While some flu strains typically start circulating by then, in 14 of the last 18 winters, large outbreaks did not begin until January or later. It only takes two weeks after vaccination to reap full protection.

The flu typically kills 20,000 Americans annually, mostly the elderly and chronically ill. Thus, they need the earliest protection.

Capitalism means high-volume corporations that placed early orders may get their vaccines before many private doctors. Manufacturers like Aventis Pasteur are helping the CDC publicize the high-risk recommendations, but no one can enforce them.

So the CDC, receiving physician complaints like Scalettar's, is asking corporations to offer the first shots only to employees who are high-risk, and vaccinate healthy workers later.

—Science in Brief— Physicist accepts position in Asia

HOUSTON (AP) — Superconductivity physicist Paul Chu, a scientist at the University of Houston, has been appointed the next president of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

Chu will lead the institution for "a few years" starting in July 2001 and then return full time to UH, according to Monday's editions of the *Houston Chronicle*.

"I really had no desire to be a president, but this was such a unique situation it was too good to turn down," said the 58-year-old Chu. Chu will retain his endowed faculty chair at UH but not be paid for it.

Chu has been UH's most prominent professor since his 1987 discovery of a compound that allows electricity to flow without resistance at a temperature higher than the boiling point of nitrogen — high-temperature superconductivity. Considered the Holy Grail of the field, it is expected to lead to better ways to store energy, propel trains and transmit electricity.

The discovery earned Chu a host of awards and honors, including the National Medal of Science in 1988.



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