



# Scoop

July 30, 2004

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS MEDICAL SCHOOL AT HOUSTON

## Events to Know

### July

**31 Tomorrow Employee Insurance Option Changes Due.** Changes effective **Sept. 1.**

### August

**11 White Coat Ceremony,** 6:30 p.m., TMC Edwin Homberger Conference Center.

**13, 14 Student Retreat,** Camp Allen.

### September

**8 Leadership Summit.** Invited faculty and staff focus on current issues, challenges, and opportunities, 8:30 a.m. - 4 p.m., Crowne Plaza Hotel.

**27 12th Annual UT Scholarship Golf Classic,** 9 a.m., Redstone Golf Club.

### October

**8 Founders' Fun Fest, 2 - 6 p.m.,** TMC Edwin Homberger Conference Center.

## BERM PROJECT TO ADD FLOOD TO PROTECTION MEASURES

Next week a new kind of construction plan that doesn't involve building classrooms or nailing Sheetrock will commence at the Medical School. The berm project, which will feature earthen berms and hydrostatic walls, is a secondary flood protection measure for the Medical School.



The first sign of the project will be a construction fence erected around Parking Lot A, which officially closed July 31. All parkers have been relocated to other lots and garages.

"The parking lot will be closed for two and a half years because we'll be using it for a lay down area for building materials when we demolish the John Freeman Building and construct the new building," said **Ernest Walkup**, project engineer/manager from Facilities Operations.

The northwest/Fannin side of the berm project will start first, and the whole project, which is FEMA approved and funded, will take about a year, Walkup added.

The berm projects includes a series of landscaped earthen berms, hydrostatic walls, new drain pipes for the roof, and large pumps for both sides of the building. So not only will the project prevent flooding of the building, it will improve drainage in Webber Plaza.



Architect's rendering of Webber Plaza

"We'll also have new landscaping for Webber Plaza. You're not going to know Webber Plaza the way it is now," Walkup said.

Any trees taken down during the project will be replaced. "If we take down 10 inches – in tree trunk diameter – worth of trees, we'll put back that amount," explained **Rives Taylor**, health science center architect.

- D. Brown

## UTMost Interest

**Austin G. Stack**, Division of Renal Diseases and Hypertension, recently was invited to participate as a member of the Special Emphasis Review Panel for R01, R21, and R03 applications on the Epidemiology of Chronic Kidney Disease at the National Institutes of Diabetes, Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIH), in Washington, D.C.

## TRACKING A STILL ELUSIVE DISEASE IN ITS EARLY STAGES

Scleroderma, also called systemic sclerosis, is a complex disease. It often is characterized by the formation of scar tissue, called fibrosis, in the skin and organs of the body, leading to thickness and firmness in the affected areas. It is an autoimmune disease of the connective tissue. Autoimmune diseases are illnesses wherein the body's tissues are attacked by their own immune system. Although described in the medical literature nearly 250 years ago, discovering its cause, and thereby effecting a cure, is still a front-line effort for researchers.

**Filemon Tan, M.D., Ph.D.**, Division of Rheumatology and Clinical Immunogenetics, was a resident here at the Medical School in 1994, when he first began to work with **Dr. Frank Arnett**, Division of Rheumatology, on scleroderma research.

"I was approached by Dr. Arnett, when I was a senior resident, to work with him on a study of the prevalence of scleroderma in the Choctaw Native Americans



Dr. Filemon Tan

(Cont'd. on back)

## FACULTY MAY SIGN UP FOR STUDENT RETREAT

Welcome the incoming class of Medical Students **Aug. 13 - 14** at Camp Allen in Navasota, Texas.

Faculty pay just \$125 for the whole family. Contact <Katherine.A.Willborn@uth.tmc.edu> with questions.



THE UNIVERSITY of TEXAS  
HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER AT HOUSTON  
MEDICAL SCHOOL

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## ***WILLERSON OUTLINES AN UPBEAT FUTURE AT PRESIDENT'S FORUM JULY 26***

UTHealth Science Center President **James T. Willerson, M.D.**, briefed Medical School faculty, students, residents, and staff on university-wide priorities, detailing progress in campus building and fundraising and affirming that change will continue in the months and years ahead.

"I know this continues to be a challenging time; thank you right now for your cooperation," said the president. "We're moving forward. Change is the only constant; embrace change. We continue to seize new opportunities while living within our means. Collaborate with your colleagues; continue to be the best in education, research, and service."

Willerson commented that the health science center is becoming more productive. "We've appointed two new deans, in addition to **Dr. Stanley Schultz** of the Medical School. There's **Dr. Cathy Flaitz** of the Dental School – who was instrumental in turning that school around – and **Dr. Guy Parcel** of the School of Public Health. These three could be deans probably anywhere in the world."

The new School of Nursing and new Student Community Center will have an open house **Oct. 29-30**. "I hope to see you all there," Willerson said, extending an invitation to all Medical School personnel to come.

## ***TRACKING A STILL ELUSIVE DISEASE, CONT'D.***

of Oklahoma." Tan said he started collaborating with Arnett when Arnett was awarded a grant from the Scleroderma Foundation. "We traveled to Broken Bow, Oklahoma together," Tan said, "to formally ascertain the prevalence of scleroderma in the Choctaw Nation and to collect genetic material for subsequent studies." Tan would later go back to spend a week at the Choctaw Nation tribal hospital in Talahina, Okla., to draw additional patients and normal controls to complete his study. In all, said the researcher, over 20 scleroderma cases were collected, among four dozen "first-degree" relatives of patients and 120 Choctaw controls for the project.

"Our epidemiologic survey did not identify an environmental trigger for the disease," Tan said. "Therefore, we thought there might be a genetic component that would explain the high prevalence of the disease. The Choctaw were an ideal population to study in this regard; they are very homogenous in their clinical presentation. Our genetic studies suggest that the high disease prevalence in the Choctaw may be due to a founder effect."

A founder effect means that a genetic factor may have been introduced into the population several generations ago.

Actually it was both **Dr. John Reveille**, Division of Rheumatology and Clinical Immunogenetics, and Arnett who first reported a very high prevalence of scleroderma in the Choctaw at the American College of Rheumatology meeting in 1993-94, Tan said. **Dr. Robert Howard**, a rheumatologist working in the Indian Health Service, was responsible for alerting Arnett to the relatively large numbers of scleroderma cases he was seeing in this small rural community.

Presently Tan is expanding his studies to scleroderma patients from the general population. Currently, he is working on skin fibroblasts, which are prominent cell types involved in scleroderma.

"We are trying to determine which genes are abnormally activated in these cells. I am interested in comparing normal skin fibroblasts with skin fibroblasts from scleroderma patients at the very early stages of disease to study the initiating events rather than the later fibrotic stages."

- C. O'Brien

## ***WEISBRODT APPOINTED VICE CHAIR, INTEGRATIVE BIOLOGY AND PHARMACOLOGY***

**Norman Weisbrodt, Ph.D.**, has been appointed vice chair, Integrative Biology and Pharmacology, effective **Sept. 1**. His appointment is in succession to **Dean Stanley Schultz**, who held the appointment of vice chair for five years.



**Dr. Norman Weisbrodt**

Weisbrodt studies gastrointestinal smooth muscle function and adaptation and collaborates with faculty from the Department of Surgery and Department of Internal Medicine in evaluating the role of gastrointestinal motility in the development of multiple organ failure. He also has received awards for his teaching activities.

## ***DEAN'S RESEARCH SCHOLARSHIP AWARD WINNERS ANNOUNCED***

Dean's Research Scholarship Awards were created to recognize Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences (GSBS) students who have achieved distinction in biomedical research, and who have a Medical School faculty adviser.

The six winners, each to receive \$2,500, and their mentors, are: **Sonja Blum/Dr. Pramod Dash**, Neurobiology & Anatomy; **April Hebert/Dr. Pramod Dash**, Neurobiology & Anatomy; **Pamela Yang/Dr. Alan Swann**, Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences; **Auinash Kalsotra/Dr. Henry Strobel**, Biochemistry & Molecular Biology; **Bao Nguyen/Dr. Carmen Dessauer**, Integrative Biology & Pharmacology; and **Amy Trott/Dr. Kevin Morano**, Microbiology & Molecular Genetics.

Each awardee will present his or her project at a program and reception 10 a.m. – 1:30 p.m. Thurs., **Sept. 2**, in the Fifth Floor Gallery.

## ***SAVE THE FITNESS CENTER!***

Did you know the Fitness Center has been going strong since 1978? Don't let a 26-year-old institution die!

Come on up to the 8th floor and get fit. The easiest way to get to the center is via stairwell 7D near the 7th floor yellow elevator.

Membership is just \$25 a month. Currently there are 131 members; 169 need to be signed up before the end of August. Kick boxing, yoga, total body workout, and personal training are just some of the ways offered to keep you fit.

Family packages are available at \$63 a month or \$160 for three months. **Memberships are also good at the 7779 Knight Road facility.** Call 713-500-5044 for the Fitness Center or refer to the Web site <<http://ae.uth.tmc.edu>> and click on Recreation Center for details.