



# Scoop

Jan. 31, 2003

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS MEDICAL SCHOOL AT HOUSTON

## DEAN RESPONDS TO MANDATE

In response to UT System **Chancellor Mark Yudof's** announcement of an immediate and flexible system-wide hiring freeze for state-funded positions and **Gov. Rick Perry's** directive to decrease state spending for FY03 by 7 percent, **Dean Max Buja** met Jan. 29 with all department chairmen, deans, and DMOs to present a Medical School plan that achieved the directives with reductions of vacant positions and nonsalary funds. No layoffs or salary decreases are planned as a response to the governor's directive. **Watch your e-mail and next week's Scoop for details of the plan, which had not been approved by UT-Houston administration by press time.**

## UT-H MED SCHOOL CHOSEN FOR TOP CONFERENCE IN MAY

UT-H Medical School was one of only seven medical schools chosen to participate in the upcoming conference at Babson College in Wellesley, Mass., the "Millennium Conference III: The Continuum of Clinical Training in Undergraduate and Graduate Medical Education," co-sponsored by the Shapiro Institute for Education and Research and the Association of American Medical Colleges, May 1- 4. The conference will focus on the education of future physicians in internal medicine and family practice.

Other conference attendees will be: Baylor College of Medicine, Drexel University College of Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Indiana University School of Medicine, Pennsylvania State University College of Medicine, and the University of Puerto Rico Medical School.

Said administration officials, "In making our selections, we gave consideration...to the level of commitment and innovation exhibited," and "we are pleased with the caliber and diversity of the schools and their teams that will be represented at the conference."

Proposed conference attendees include: **Drs. Patricia Butler, John Ribble, Eugene Boisubin, Philip Orlander, Laura Colletti, Margaret Uthman, Carlos Moreno, and Grant Fowler.**

## NARAYANA REGROUPS WITH GRANTS, NEW IMAGING TOOLS

**Dr. Ponnada Narayana**, professor and director, Magnetic Resonance Research, Radiology, has something to crow about. Narayana is the principal investigator for two new National Institutes of Health awards totaling nearly \$5.2M for his MRI studies. His new high-field scanner, to replace the original German built seven-ton scanner irreparably damaged in Tropical Storm Allison, and his new imaging center, being constructed on the Medical School's ground floor and due to open by **May 15, 2003**, (see *Scoop* 1/24/03), also are part of his good news.



**Dr. Ponnada Narayana**

The new scanner has the capacity to image very small anatomic structures with higher resolution and greater detection sensitivity. This becomes useful in characterizing spinal cord injuries and a host of neurological diseases, including multiple sclerosis and Alzheimer's.

Also, imaging genetically engineered mice and following their tissue's biochemistry and metabolism in vivo noninvasively and serially will revolutionize biomedical research, Narayana said.

"We design novel techniques to look at the physiology, biochemistry, and in vivo metabolism in live animals to improve the specificity of tissue pathology," Narayana said.

His grant, the \$2.5M study titled "Magnetic Resonance of Spinal Cord Injury," is tracking cortical reorganization in spinal cord injured animals. Said Narayana, "This information will be of great use in instituting treatments in spinal cord injured subjects."

His second study, a \$2.7M grant, "Automated MR Image Analysis in MS: Identification of a Surrogate," in collaboration with **Jerry Wolinsky, M.D.**, will follow "the progression or regression of neurologic diseases noninvasively and evaluate the efficacy of treatments in multi-center clinical trials," he said.

These observations will have future applications, Narayana believes, for community-based medicine, for personal computer and software applications, as well as for a Web-based program that will appeal to stroke and brain trauma medical professionals.

"With the use of the functional MRI scanner, we try to see noninvasively how the spinal cord and the brain interact. We do this by following the same group of animals over a period of time." - *C. O'Brien*

## PRACTICE PLAN OFF TO NORMAL START OF FISCAL YEAR

The Medical School's faculty practice plan is off to a typical, anticipated financial start this fiscal year; however, historically charges and collections pick up in the second half of the year, according to **Kevin Dillon**, UT-Houston chief financial officer.

Dillon presented the year-to-date financials at the Jan. 23 Medical Service Research and Development Plan (MSRDP) Annual Meeting of Members. Based on the first four months of fiscal year 2003, the combined Medical School's practice plan shows a \$3.3M loss. MSRDP accounts for \$3.7M in loss while University Care Plus (UCP) had a surplus of \$400,000. (See back page).



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Produced weekly by the Office of Community Affairs and Public Education



MSRDP is the "trust fund" for the university's clinical services and its board members are the Medical School's department chairmen and at-large members, who are elected by the faculty. UCP is the business arm of the practice plan.

"We still project a modest \$1 million profit for the practice plan for the entire fiscal year 2003," Dillon said, adding that the plan "nearly broke even" for fiscal year 2002, which ended last August.

Gross charges are up about \$8M for fiscal year 2003, compared to last year. The plan is averaging about \$8M a month in gross collections—and recording about \$25M a month in gross charges. The gross collection rate is about 30 percent and the net collection rate is 84.2 percent for the first four months of fiscal year 2003—both up 2 percentage points from last year at this time.

Dillon noted that the entire Health Science Center's operating margin is a negative \$4.6M for the first four months of fiscal year 2003, with the practice plan constituting the majority of this loss. "It's been a tough year so far, but we always do better in the second half of the year," he said.

**Carol Alexander**, of Health Directions Inc., which took over the management of Physician Billing Services Dec. 10, 2001, reported that several new changes have been implemented to improve the billing process and collection rates, including a paperless collection system, a new patient statement, and contracting with an electronic claims clearing house—Claimlogic.

Some faculty members expressed concerns that their services are being paid at a low rate due to less than optimal insurance contracts.

"In the last six months, we've renegotiated 10 contracts with improved rates and with significant increases in the payment for anesthesia services," said **Andrew Casas**, vice president of business operations for UCP. "We are looking more carefully at rates when we negotiate our contracts."

One contracted insurance company, Cigna, has threatened to terminate UT-Houston Physicians as a practice group in part because so few physicians have privileges at Cigna in-network hospitals. "This is the most aggressive attack on us by an insurance company," **Dean Max Buja, M.D.**, said. "What is at risk is \$10 million in charges and \$4 million in collections."

A resolution to this dispute occurred Jan. 29. Meanwhile, Casas encouraged clinicians to seek out privileges in other hospitals.

Also in the UCP report, **William Paddock**, the new UCP CEO, was introduced, as was **Carlos Hamilton, M.D.**, the new chairman of the board of UCP.

In an effort to expand services and increase revenues, UCP has signed an agreement with Physician Dialysis, Inc., to provide ambulatory dialysis services, said **Diana Browning**, vice president of clinical operations for UCP. Other plans for ambulatory and ancillary services for the practice plan include imaging, laboratories, and surgical centers.

The practice plan is entering into contract negotiations with the Harris County Hospital District and Memorial Hermann Hospital for faculty services and resident and fellow stipends. The new 80-hour workweek rules for residents will prove challenging, **Dean Buja** said. "This will have a major impact on our clinical activities and educational programs that we'll have to address going forward," he said.

**President James T. Willerson, M.D.**, told the audience he has requested \$34.9M in emergency funds from legislative leaders to restore the Medical School from Tropical Storm Allison's devastation. That amount represents the gap between insurance and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funds and what is needed to bring the School back better than it was before.

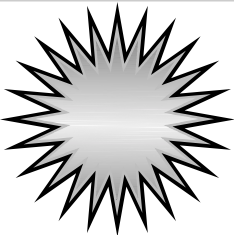
He added that in order to receive FEMA funds, the Health Science Center must come up with the 25 cents on the dollar needed as a match. So far, Dr. Willerson said, UT-Houston has received \$57M in insurance funds and \$8M from FEMA.

Dr. Willerson also talked about the status of the Mental Sciences Institute move, which was planned to be near The University of Texas Harris County Psychiatric Center. Due to community concerns, this will not be done. Instead, the house and four acres the Health Science Center purchased for this purpose may be used to house children's programs, such as Reach Out and Read and the Center for Academic and Reading Skills, and also as a place for visiting dignitaries to stay and as a conference center.

The MRSDP Board will meet again in April.

A Web version of this meeting, accessible only to UT-Houston employees, may be found under "hot spots" on the Medical School homepage: [www.med.uth.tmc.edu](http://www.med.uth.tmc.edu). - D. Brown

## JANUARY EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH - LYNNE FIFE



**Lynne Fife**, administrative services officer III, Management Information Services, our January Employee of the Month, is a go-getter. Neither rain, nor sleet, nor a hot and humid 150-mile bike ride to Austin last year as part of a fund-raiser for multiple sclerosis research, could slow this woman down.

That kind of stick-to-itiveness is indicative of Lynne in everything she does, say colleagues.

She's known for being on call at all times; she'll help out with whatever's needed, whether driving to a vendors, sitting on the Work Life Council as a member, whether donning blue jeans to help out moving computers and printers, Lynne is a Jill-of-all-Trades. She'll anticipate needs even before her team does.

She excels at building teamwork and is an inspiration to others, say those who work with her. "She'll even go the distance and spend extra hours on a weekend at work just to make sure timesheets are up to date," said an associate. Now that's dedication!



Lynne Fife