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Partnership puts Moldova on the map for people

By Kim Grizzard
The Daily Reflector

In the year and a half he has served as U.S. Ambassador to Moldova, Michael Kirby has made two official visits to the Tarheel State, causing some of his colleagues to question: Why North Carolina?

Though Kirby attended graduate school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, his ties to the state made no difference in his decision to come to North Carolina. The reason he came halfway around the world was to meet with people who have made a world of difference in Moldova.

"I got to Moldova, and I saw so many wonderful things the people in North Carolina were doing," Kirby said Monday in Chapel Hill at the first North Carolina-Moldova Health Summit. "...I didn't know we did all this stuff. Nobody at the embassy knew we did all this."

All this — digging wells, building clinics, immunizing children — is what Michael Kirby, U.S. Ambassador to Moldova, speaks at a news conference in Moldova last year. He brought not only the ambassador but Moldova's minister of health, Dr. Ion I. Ababii, to North Carolina this week to discuss the "Partnership for Peace."

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Ababii's visit also included stops in Greensville, Raleigh and Greensboro to discuss the partnership, one of 15 state-to-country unions formed to build bilateral relationships after the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union.

Formally established in 1999 and renewed in 2004 for an additional five-year term, the North Carolina-Moldova partnership has grown to include businesses, civic organizations, nonprofit agencies and universities. These groups have helped provide everything from care for orphans to cultural exchanges and construction of the country's first hospice.

"It is much more than that piece of paper," North Carolina Secretary of State Elaine Marshall said.

Dorothy Spencer knows that first hand. As director of Laupus Library, See MOLDOVA, A7
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part of the Division of Health Services at East Carolina University, Spencer was part of an effort that collected some 7,000 current medical books and journals that were shipped to Moldova last summer. That’s nearly 150 cases of books.

"The logistics of doing this book exchange are not for the faint-hearted," Spencer, who also serves as associate vice chancellor for communication and information resources, said in a telephone interview last week. "It was a very physically demanding project."

Along with the books, the Moldovan medical libraries were given free access to electronic medical databases. A software program called DOCLINE, donated by the U.S. National Library of Medicine, allows Moldovan librarians to request electronic journal articles from North Carolina libraries.

"It just takes like minutes to get it there," said Donna Flake, health sciences library director for Coastal Eastern Area Health Education Centers. "That's really important for patient care. When a doctor needs specific information, we are able to get it there immediately."

Flake, of Wilmington, who leads the medical libraries project with volunteer Diane Darrow, said last week that a company has agreed to give Moldova use of a new database — the Nursing Reference Center — which hospitals in the United States pay $20,000 a year to access.

"None of the North Carolina libraries even have this database yet, but they're giving it to Moldova," Flake said. "People are really getting behind this project."

Already, private physicians as well as medical schools across the state have donated about 40 cases of journals for the shipments to Moldova, which organizers hope to make twice a year.

During a tour of Laupus Library on Wednesday, Ababii said the medical libraries project would save lives in Moldova. The poorest nation in Europe, Moldova lacks funds to provide its health care professionals with up-to-date medical text books and journals.

"That (donated) collection is in demand in Chisinau," he said. "For me, the library is what the church is for a person who has great faith in God."

Flake believes the medical libraries project may be the first in a series of library partnerships between Moldova and North Carolina. She is working to set up a meeting between one of Moldova's librarians and ECU's Joyner Library about a second project.

"There's a possibility that out of this will come a similar partnership with academic libraries in Moldova," Flake said. "It would be wonderful if the partnerships could emerge between these two libraries."

Already, partnerships with Moldova have come out of other departments at ECU. Rosina Chia, ECU's assistant vice chancellor for Global Academic Initiatives, began a relationship with Moldova when Moldova State University joined a growing list of schools worldwide participating in ECU's online global understanding course. In the class, classrooms communicate through live video and chat technology to discuss their culture.

The program, which Chia started five years ago to give international exposure to students who would not have a chance to study abroad, has been adopted by two universities within the California State University system and is scheduled to be implemented in Michigan. In the course, participating countries like Moldova link with ECU and two other countries to discuss traditions, values and current events. In addition to listening to lectures from one another's professors, cross-cultural partners in the classes e-mail each other to share ideas and collaborate on a paper.

"I want them to sit in the same class with people from that country and actually work with people from that country. They learn from each other," Chia said at Monday's summit at the University of North Carolina School of Public Health, where she announced the start of a global health course, a new Internet collaboration between North Carolina and Moldova.

At the summit, Chia's undertaking, which only requires an Internet connection and a video camera, was presented as a possible way to communicate with Moldova Peace Corps volunteers working to help provide the country with potable water.

"Why can't we use that same technology?" Chia asked. "There are limitless possibilities."

Already the technology is being used to provide virtual medical lectures from ECU's Brody School of Medicine to Moldova.

Dr. Chris Bremer, professor emeritus of family medicine at Brody, launched the lecture series in October 2006. The lectures, held biweekly during the academic year, are provided by local physicians who volunteer their time.

"They're just glad to do it," Bremer said. "They get excited about talking to somebody way over there."

Last spring, Bremer traveled to Moldova to meet the medical students and professors he had seen on the screen for months. His trip was to learn about Moldova's medical system and to determine how the program could better serve Moldovan physicians.

"A year and a half ago, I hardly knew where Moldova was," said Bremer, who plans to return to the country for a follow-up visit this spring. "I'm amazed at all the connections that keep coming up."

Secretary of State Marshall feels the same way. Her office, which has taken on the role under the partnership of matching needs with resources, is often unaware of projects North Carolinians are undertaking in Moldova.

"A lot of folks have called (the Secretary of State's office) the gatekeeper on this project," she said. "That is absolutely the wrong term. We are more like a conduit."

"I'm always thrilled when I hear of things that I have no knowledge whatsoever have taken place," Marshall said. "When that happens, I consider it a really good day."

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Jeff Theus named head of new early college program

Starting in August, high school students interested in teaching will simultaneously attend high school and college.

By Josh Humphries
The Daily Reflector

Officials named the principal who will lead a new school that will allow ninth graders to earn college credit.

Jeff Theus, currently principal at Wellcome Middle School, was appointed principal at the new Early College High School, slated to open at East Carolina University in August. Forty high school freshmen will take college courses along with their high school classes during the program.

"I am grateful for the opportunity to be a part of Pitt County Schools' effort to expand opportunities through the Early College initiative," Theus said. He has worked in the Pitt County school system since 1997.

The new school will blend college courses with high school curriculum, and by the time students graduate in their senior year, they will have 60 college credit hours. The school is aimed at students who plan to become educators.

"The partnership between Pitt County Schools, Pitt Community College and East Carolina University will allow students to get two years of transferable college credit or an associate's degree while gaining knowledge about careers in education," he said.

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Any rising ninth-grader can apply to attend the school.

Dorothy Muller, interim assistant vice chancellor and co-director of the center for faculty excellence at ECU, is the university's liaison for the school.

"I think (Theus) will make a great principal," she said.

"Now that we have a principal, Pitt County Schools can move forward in working to implement the school," Muller said.

Theus will take the lead on creating a time line when applications will be accepted and when a review committee will select students for the school, said Heather Mayo, Pitt County Schools spokeswoman.

Admission is open to eighth-graders only for fall admission as ninth-graders. The program will grow to four hundred students by fall 2011.

The Early College High School is part of the New Schools Project in North Carolina, an initiative of the Governor's Office supported by a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The students will begin taking college course right away in small groups and eventually they will be enrolled in regular classes with ECU students.

The first freshman class will be 40 students. The goal is to have 100 students in each grade level by the fifth year, Muller said.

The school is being offered in a partnership between Pitt County Schools, ECU and Pitt Community College. Faculty members from each institution have been meeting and planning curriculum for the students.

Theus joined Pitt County Schools as a teacher at North Pitt High School. In 2002, he joined the N.C. Principal Fellow Program at East Carolina University and worked at Farmville Central High School as an administrative intern. Upon completing the program in 2004, Theus joined the staff at South Central High School as the assistant principal. In 2006, he was named the principal at Wellcome Middle School.

Theus holds both a bachelor's degree in exercise and sport science and a master's degree in school administration from East Carolina University.

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Brody is a model for Moldova health

By Kim Grizzard
The Daily Reflector

During a visit to Greenville on Wednesday, Moldova's minister of health saw how medicine in eastern North Carolina and Moldova are worlds apart, yet very much the same.

At a daylong event at the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University, Dr. Ion I. Ababii got to see demonstrations of telemedicine and electronic medical records as well as a patient simulation — most using technology that is unavailable in Moldova.

But Ababii also had a chance to discuss strategies for providing cost-effective health care to people in rural areas. Nicholas H. Benson, vice dean and professor of emergency medicine at the medical school, said it is a familiar challenge for doctors in eastern North Carolina.

"I think you've got some of the same challenges in Moldova," Benson said. "There are huge similarities."

"They want to get more of their medical graduates going into primary care, and clearly that's a major strength for us here at Brody," he said. "How can we translate that to another country? That's what we will be talking about in the weeks and months ahead."

A primary care physician is a doctor who provides the first contact for a person with an undiagnosed health problem as well as continuing care for a variety of medical conditions. Certain clinicians, including those trained in family practice, general practice, pediatrics and internal medicine are commonly referred to as primary care physicians.

The Brody School of Medicine, which included family medicine as one of its founding departments in 1977, has received national recognition for its family medicine programs. In 2006, U.S. News and World Report's Best Graduate Schools Report ranked family medicine at Brody ninth out of 126 medical schools in the nation. The report ranked Brody sixth among top schools for primary care and seventh for rural medicine.

At the first North Carolina-Moldova Health Summit, held Monday at the University of North Carolina School of Public Health, U.S. Ambassador to Moldova Michael Kirby said universities throughout the state are helping promote primary care as a medical emphasis in Moldova.

Moldova, a nation between Ukraine and Romania, has about the size of the state of Maryland and has a population of about 4 million people. The poorest country in Europe, Moldova, part of the Soviet Union until 1991, has many health care clinics that lack not only the latest technology but basic health care equipment.

"Part of the thing that I've been trying to encourage the Moldovans to think about is family medicine, primary health care," Kirby said. "We have to figure out how we can get the Moldovans — within the limitations of their resources — to provide better health care across the board."

One of the ways the Brody medical school promotes family medicine is through the Family Medicine Interest Group. The program, which has been nationally recognized for innovations in helping students learn about family medicine, uses workshops, volunteer clinics and faculty mentoring to teach students about family medicine.

Ababii said he believes the approach to family medicine has potential in Moldova.

"During the discussions that I've had with Professor (Chris) Bremer, (professor emeritus at the Brody School of Medicine) he let me know that they have encountered great success in convincing the graduates of the medical departments here at the university to go further in the education, specifically in the domain of family medicine," Ababii said. "We have already come to an agreement to start working on implementing the same practices in the Republic of Moldova."

Kirby said it is not surprising that practical solutions to some of Moldova's health care concerns are coming from the country's partnership with North Carolina.

"In Moldova, most people are rural. Maybe people in the smaller towns and cities of North Carolina have a little more to offer," he said. "Maybe they have some experience and some thoughts or at least some commonality."

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Attorney General Roy Cooper will deliver the keynote address for East Carolina University's second annual Campus Safety Symposium, Jan. 31 through Feb. 1.

Designed to attract school administrators from colleges and universities from across the region, the symposium will cover legal and safety challenges academic institutions face today. The challenges include crisis communications and strategies for safer campuses, said Peter Romary, director of Student Legal Services.

The mass shooting April 16 at Virginia Tech prompted Cooper to review campus security at the state's universities.

His campus safety task force, formed in the wake of the shooting last spring, issued its recommendations Thursday. ECU already had implemented many of its recommendations.

This month's symposium will offer an opportunity for all schools to take another look.

"Safety is obviously a top priority for all educational institutions," Romary said. "Through this symposium we plan to provide attendees with knowledge and skills that are best in practice at identifying threats, preventing violent crimes and communicating and responding effectively if events occur."

Last year's event drew more than 200 participants.

The two-day conference will be held at the Greenville Hilton, and costs $100. Registration is under way.

The event also will include training in threat assessment by the U.S. Secret Service and an address by Mark Namee, provost of Virginia Tech.

Other speakers include:

Kevin Foust from the Federal Bureau of Intelligence; Eugene Zdziarski, assistant vice president and dean of Students at the University of Florida; David Robey, of the Secret Service Threat Assessment Team; Dave Rainer, associate vice chancellor for ECU Environmental Health and Public Safety; and Scott Bullard, director of emergency services for the N.C. Community College System.

Also scheduled to attend are ECU Chancellor Steve Ballard and Chancellor Willie Gilchrist of Elizabeth City State University; Lynn Roeder, ECU's dean of students and Glen Gilbert, ECU's dean of Health and Human Performance.

For more details or registration information, visit www.ecu.edu/universityunions/safetysymposium.
Progress in prostate cancer

Wake Forest University took part in study hailed as a step toward revealing causes.

By Marilyn Marchione
The Associated Press

Scientists have taken a key step toward revealing the causes of prostate cancer, finding that a combination of five gene variants dramatically raises the risk of the disease. Added to family history, they accounted for nearly half of all cases in a study of Swedish men.

The discovery is remarkable not just for the big portion of cases it might explain, but also because this relatively new approach — looking at combinations rather than single genes — may help solve the mystery of many complex diseases like cancer and diabetes that are thought to involve multiple genes or interactions between them.

"It gives us a new way of looking at genetic risk factors," said Dr. Teri Manolio of the National Human Genome Research Institute, the federal agency focused on such work.

It also might lead to a blood test to predict who is likely to develop prostate cancer. Such men could be closely monitored and perhaps offered hormone-blocking drugs like finasteride to try to prevent the disease.

The study was led by doctors at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C., and involved Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm. Results were published online Wednesday by the New England Journal of Medicine.

The Swedish results must be verified in other countries and races, where the gene variants, or markers, may not be as common. Researchers already have plans to look for them in U.S. men.

Unfortunately, the markers do not help doctors tell which cancers need treatment and which do not — they turned out to have nothing to do with the aggressiveness of a tumor, only whether a man is likely to develop a tumor.

Nor did they correlate with levels of PSA, a blood substance often used to gauge cancer risk. PSA is a notoriously imprecise measure, so a gene test that independently predicts risk would be very valuable, experts said.

This "eyebrow-raisin study" should quickly spur more research, particularly in blacks, who have a higher incidence of prostate cancer, said Dr. Howard Sandler, a cancer specialist at the University of Michigan and spokesman for the American Society of Clinical Oncology.

Prostate cancer is the most common cancer in American men and arguably the most mysterious. Unlike breast cancer, where variants in single genes like BRCA are known to confer greater risk, few such genes have been discovered for prostate cancer. In the past year, other researchers identified five, but none individually seemed to raise risk very much.

Combinations of them did, the new work reveals.

Some of the U.S. researchers are seeking patents to develop a blood test using the results.
CDC to study condition in which sores sprout threads

BY MIKE STORBE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATLANTA — It sounds like a freakish ailment from a horror movie: Sores erupt on your skin, mysterious threads pop out of them, and you feel like tiny bugs are crawling all over you.

Some experts believe it's a psychiatric phenomenon, yet hundreds of people say it's a true physical condition. It's called Morgellons (pronounced mor-GEll-uns), and now the government is about to begin its first medical study of it.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is paying California-based health-care giant Kaiser Permanente $338,000 to test and interview patients suffering from the bizarre symptoms. The one-year effort will attempt to define the condition and better determine how common it is.

The study will be done in northern California, the source of many of the reports of Morgellons. Researchers will begin screening patients immediately, CDC officials said Wednesday. A Kaiser official expects about 150 to 500 study participants.

Morgellons sufferers describe symptoms that include erupting sores, fatigue, the sensation of bugs crawling over them and, perhaps worst of all, mysterious red, blue or black fibers that sprout from their skin. They've documented their suffering on Web sites.

Some doctors believe the condition is a form of delusional parasitosis, a psychosis in which people think they are infected with parasites. In the study, volunteers will get blood tests and skin exams, as well as psychological evaluations, said Dr. Michele Pearson, who leads a CDC task force overseeing the study.
20,250 apply to attend Duke

Duke University has received a record number of applications for admission in the fall — 20,250. The applicants will compete for 1,665 spots in the freshman class.

Last year Duke received 19,206 applications. Duke officials say the rise in applications may be a result of the university’s new financial aid policies, which were announced in December. An overwhelming majority of students applying close to the deadline indicated they would seek financial aid.

Last month, Duke announced it would eliminate parental contributions for families who make less than $60,000 a year and make it possible for students from families with incomes of less than $40,000 to graduate debt-free. The university also will reduce loans for students from families with incomes of as much as $100,000 and cap loans for eligible families with incomes of more than $100,000.

This year’s pool includes an increase in applicants from North Carolina, international, Latino and Asian students and children of alumni, the university said.
University owner misled investors

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PHOENIX - Apollo Group, the for-profit company that owns the University of Phoenix, fraudulently misled investors about its student recruitment policies, a federal jury ruled, and was ordered to pay shareholders about $280 million.

Shareholders claimed Apollo misled investors when it kept secret a Department of Education report that criticized the University of Phoenix's recruitment policies.

The report concluded that the University of Phoenix paid enrollment counselors solely based on the recruiters' success in obtaining enrollments, which violates federal regulations.
Yale follows trend by increasing financial aid

Plan will cut costs, boost accessibility

By Mary Beth Marklein
USA TODAY

Yale University’s announcement Monday that it would reduce college costs for families across a wide range of incomes surprised exactly no one who monitors the competition among the nation’s wealthiest universities.

Shortly after Harvard announced an overhaul of its financial aid policy last month, Yale officials made clear they had something in the works. The University of Pennsylvania soon unveiled its aid plan, confirming predictions that a ripple effect would continue.

On Monday, Yale President Richard Levin said “extraordinary” returns on Yale’s endowment, valued at $22.5 billion and second only to Harvard’s $35 billion, enable the school to boost its financial aid budget by $24 million to more than $80 million annually.

Yale will use the money to exempt more lower-income parents from having to contribute to their children’s education and to cut the average cost of attendance by thousands of dollars for families with incomes of up to $200,000. The changes apply to entering and returning students this fall.

Yale also will enhance grants to families who have more than one child attending college and exempt the first $200,000 of family assets. Tuition, room and board increases for the 2008-09 year will be held to 2.2%, the same as the expected inflation rate. (That’s less than half the 4.5% tuition increase for the current year.)

The goal is “to really get the message across... that we are affordable and accessible,” Levin says.

Although Yale’s initiative is part of a continuing trend among wealthy colleges to help families cover student costs, it also is a response to growing pressure from state and federal lawmakers on colleges of all stripes to ease the burden on families. Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, who wants colleges to be required to spend 5% of their endowment earnings each year, as other nonprofits must do, praised the Harvard and Yale announcements.

"More than 60 other colleges and universities with endowments of at least $1 billion are making their sound loud by comparison," he said.

But Robert Shireman of the non-profit Project on Student Debt worries that other colleges with fewer financial sources will focus limited dollars on higher-income families in order to compete for the brightest students, which would be more affluent.

"We encourage colleges to fully fulfill the neediest students before extending financial aid pledges up the income scale," he says.

For details on how Yale’s changes would affect families of different income levels, visit news.usatoday.com.