THE DAILY CLIPS

February 11, 2009

News, commentary, and opinion
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Research focuses on what leads to type 2 diabetes

By Tom Marine
The Daily Reflector

Wednesday, February 11, 2009

Researchers at East Carolina University have discovered evidence that could dramatically shift the debate on what conditions lead to type 2 diabetes.

The study, conducted by P. Darrell Neuer and Ethan J. Anderson, reports a precondition for diabetes known as insulin resistance is caused when cells are out of metabolic balance and emit elevated levels of hydrogen peroxide. As a result, the signal for the cells to break down blood sugar is disrupted, meaning the pancreas must work harder to produce more insulin.

“Our hypothesis is that insulin resistance may not be a chronic disease state, but a state that the cells move into because of the nutritional overload it is under,” Neuer, associate director of research at ECU’s Metabolic Institute, said.

To help illustrate his point, Neuer compared the cell’s mitochondria — cellular power sources that break down nutrients and create energy — to an engine. He said if there is too much fuel, such as excess fatty foods, and little demand of physical activity, this causes the engine to run improperly.

Neuer concluded the hydrogen peroxide being emitted from these “engines” is the primary factor leading to insulin resistance. This new evidence differs from conventional wisdom about diabetes, he said, which centers around the accumulation of fat inside cells that interferes with the insulin signal.

“The beauty of it is that it makes so much sense,” Neuer said. “It’s in line with what we understand about the disease and what is effective in treating and preventing it.”

Anderson, research instructor for the Departments of Cardiovascular Sciences and Exercise-Sport Science at the East Carolina Heart Institute, said the research also highlights the importance of a healthy diet and daily exercise. By lowering the intake of calories and increasing physical activity, he said the effects of insulin resistance will reverse.

Both Anderson and Neuer noted how type 2 diabetes is rampant across the country, especially in eastern North Carolina.

The prevalence of diabetes has spiked more than 100 percent during the past decade, according to the North Carolina State Center for Health Statistics. More than 600,000 adults diabetics live in the state.

Even as the number of diabetics continues to grow, the study’s most significant contribution may be found within another medical field, battling cardiac disease, stroke and cancer.

“This changes the way scientists are thinking about metabolic balance and how cells respond, react and operate in this respect,” said Neuer, also a professor of Exercise and Sports Science for the Department of Physiology at the Brody School of Medicine. “It does give some clues about what can be used with potential treatments of type 2 diabetes.”

Anderson described the study as a paradigm shift in the way insulin resistance is viewed.

While working with these experiments, the researchers used a new molecule, an antioxidant that specifically targets the mitochondria. Anderson, who is now implementing the molecule to study human cardiovascular disease, said it may lead to new treatments for insulin resistance or to potential therapy for patients recovering from heart surgery.

“This is a great opportunity,” he said. “When you uncover something unexpected, you have to follow it.”
The study will be published next month in the Journal of Clinical Investigation, the publication of the American Society for Clinical Investigation. An online version of the article is available on the journal’s Web site, www.jci.org.

Contact Tom Marine at tmarine@coxnc.com or (252) 329-9567.

FAQs

What is insulin resistance?

A precondition of type 2 diabetes that is caused by diets high in fatty foods and low levels of exercise.

What is metabolic imbalance?

When a cell experiences high amounts of fuel from food and a low energy demand.

What is a mitochondria?

An organelle responsible for taking in nutrients, breaking them down, and creating energy for the cell.

What is insulin?

Generated by the pancreas, insulin is a hormone that signals body cells to take glucose from the bloodstream.

LOCAL EVENTS

Two events are planned to benefit the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF).

The Greenville Krispy Kreme Run is planned for 8 a.m. on Feb. 28 at the East Carolina University commuter lot on College Hill Drive. Participants will run 1 1/2 miles from College Hill Drive to Krispy Kreme, eat a dozen donuts and run back. “Freedom” is the theme of the run designed to bring awareness to JDRF and its efforts to help children with type 1 diabetes.

Registration and check-in begin at 7 a.m. Awards will be presented for top winners and top finishers in age groups. The entry fee is $20 before Feb. 21; there is a $2 online registration fee. Participants also may register on race day. For more information or a registration form, call Annette Peery at 252-717-8078.

In addition, JDRF will host its fifth annual Eastern NC Walk to Cure Diabetes March 21 at the Greenville Convention Center. Registration begins at 9 a.m., the walk begins at 10:30 a.m. The event will include refreshments, attractions and children’s activities. To register for the walk, visit www.walk.jdrf.org. For more information, contact Kelly Fleming at 800-377-0476 or kfleming@jdrf.org.

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Kathy Kolasa: DASH eating plan helps reduce weight, blood pressure, cholesterol

Tuesday, February 10, 2009

Q I am a new convert to following a healthy lifestyle. For years, I ate and drank whatever I wanted. Now I have a health problem that makes me pay attention. Do you have a recommended way of eating? — G.H., Bethel

A It is never too late to start paying attention to your eating pattern and physical activity. Eating “right” and being physically active can help you feel better, have more energy and make your medicines work better. Daniel Becerra is a fourth-year medical student planning to specialize in family medicine. Here is what he learned while working with us.

Many people in Eastern Carolina started their new year with a commitment to lifestyle modifications to improve their health, their energy levels or even their appearance. Dieting, losing weight and improving overall health seem like a good place to start, right? This is why many people flock to “proven” dieting plans, “proven” diet pills, and beauty magazines for advice. Unfortunately, those “proven” plans may be based on hype, not fact.

So what method should people try that is within a reasonable cost? The DASH diet.

DASH is an eating plan that can help reduce weight, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. The plan was developed by researchers funded by the National Institutes of Health.

The National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute and the American Heart Association recommend that all healthy people follow the DASH eating plan because they state that “very simple changes in diet can result in a dramatic health difference." The DASH diet has also been called “the diet for all diseases" because it may also reduce the risk of heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, obesity and even cancer.

The DASH diet includes the right foods for lowering blood pressure (fruits, vegetables, grains, low-fat dairy products and lean protein foods). The reduction in blood pressure is about the same that is achieved by using one blood pressure medication, researchers have found.

Another great aspect of the DASH diet is its cost. Many diets and medications may be very costly, but the DASH diet was designed to be financially friendly. You can find an example of a DASH plan developed with the favorite foods of eastern North Carolinians at www.ecu.edu/fammed. Look under resources for patients. There is a DASH plan, complete with a list of ingredients for each meal by brand name, cost and portion size, and they are all available at your local store. You don't have to shop at a specialty or high-end grocery store to follow DASH. Of course, if you do have the resources, you can use fresh and exotic fruits and vegetables instead of canned or frozen produce.

If this list is used, a person can eat three square meals a day ranging anywhere from $5-$12 for the whole day. The nutritionists at ECU Family Medicine also provide specific regimens for children and diabetics.

If you are interested in the DASH diet, please consult your family physician and see if the DASH diet may be right for you. Ask for a referral to a registered dietitian to tailor the diet to your health and financial needs.

Professor Kathy Kolasa, a registered dietitian and Ph.D., works with the Family Medicine Center, Brody School of Medicine at ECU. Contact her at kolasaka@ecu.edu.

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At Historic Stagville Plantation in Durham County, slave history has become a draw. These were slave quarters.
Staff Photo by Chuck Liddy

Fourth-grade students from Pearsecot Elementary in Durham tour Historic Stagville Plantation. Tourism at the site has grown since curators began stressing its slave history.
Staff Photo by Chuck Liddy

Slave history often whitewashed

KRISTIN COLLINS, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

The Joel Lane Museum House in downtown Raleigh is where one of the state's most prominent families lived, sipping tea from expensive china and overseeing an empire of 6,000 acres.

It is also where slaves cooked and scrubbed and worked the fields -- but that gets scant mention at the privately owned museum.

Those who run the Lane House, like the leaders at many of the state's historic plantations, are uncomfortable talking about the practices that allowed wealthy owners to prosper. A new study from East Carolina University shows that, at many North Carolina plantations, talk of slaves takes a backseat to discussions of architecture, furnishings and gardens.

"It's a hard thing to talk about, because there's very little good you can say about it," said
Belle Long, curator at the Lane House. "It's just awkward. It's such a black period in our history."

Long said she added a few mentions of slavery to the house tour last year. Before that, it was never mentioned to visitors.

According to the study, which examined the Web sites of 20 North Carolina plantations, seven don't mention slavery in their promotional materials. Only three were making strong efforts to reflect the slave experience.

"These plantations were not just about their white owners," said Derek Alderman, a geography professor who led the study. "As we come to terms with the legacy of racism in the United States, we have to recognize, whether we like it or not, that there was brutality that happened in the old South."

Some plantations, Alderman said, create the image of happy slaves cared for by benevolent masters.

At Darshana Hall Plantation in Iredell County, for example, the owners describe the masters as exceptionally kind, hiring a doctor to tend to the slaves and providing ponds for them to fish in. They also tell of "Granny Phyllis," who legend says lived to 125 and had free run of the plantation. As Alderman's study points out, most slaves didn't live to 30.

Darshana owner Meredith Hall, who hosts weddings and tours, said the stories of slaves are an important part of the house. But he said he doesn't believe that all owners were cruel.

"I think that there's a real misconception of slavery; it was a relative thing," Hall said. "This family tried to treat people well. They kept the families together. ... They had a pretty good reputation with regard to slavery."

**Owing up pays off**

North Carolina's plantation tourism doesn't have the cachet of places such as Charleston, S.C., or Savannah, Ga. But Alderman said historic tourism is growing, and sites that pay attention to black history stand to reap rewards.

Historic Stagville Plantation, north of Durham, has learned that. Visitors increased from 6,000 in 2007 to nearly 13,000 in 2008, said site manager Frachele Scott, who made slavery a key part of the tour when she arrived in 2007.

Stagville, now owned by the state, was one of the South's largest plantations, encompassing 30,000 acres and 900 slaves.

Nearly half its visitors now are black, up from a tiny fraction in 2007, Scott said. One group came from Senegal to see where their ancestors were taken.

"Word spreads," Scott said, "at Stagville, they're not just talking about the white people."

Guides tell visitors that, on winter nights, the masters of the home were tucked in by a slave who warmed the sheets and closed the curtains on their canopy bed. They tell of the cook who tended an open fire and lived above it, losing her 9-year-old son when the kitchen burned to the ground -- as kitchens often did in those days.

And every tour includes a stop at the slave village, known as Horton Grove, about a mile from the main house. Guides take visitors through the rudimentary homes where as many as 10 people lived in one small room and children slept on thin pads laid on drafty floorboards.

"We do it so no one feels guilty or ashamed," Scott said. "We are teaching people that this is part of our shared American story."
Alderman says such efforts are part of a national trend. Some of the nation's most famous historic sites, such as Colonial Williamsburg and Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson, have made slavery a key part of their tours and research. Monticello created an online database that catalogs all information known about Jefferson's slaves.

**Limitations of history**

In North Carolina, however, lesser-known plantations don't have money for major research projects or new exhibits.

Long says that, in the case of the Joel Lane House, she has little information about its slaves, other than the names of people bequeathed to Lane's children. Twenty-nine "negroes" are listed in the will by first names such as Jim Boy, Affie and Cleresey.

Long said the slave cabins disappeared long before the preservation group Colonial Dames of America bought the home in the 1920s. The group has found no documentation of the roles that slaves played.

She said they don't even have a picture of Lane himself, a prominent plantation owner who sold part of his land to allow the creation of Raleigh in 1792.

Still, Long said she has made a point of adding an explanation of the types of slaves who would have worked on the plantation. She points out a cot in the children's room as the place where an enslaved nanny likely slept.

Long calls slavery "indescribable."

"It's important to acknowledge that it existed, and it happened right here in this place," Long said. "But we don't know anything about how [Lane] treated them or what their lives were like."

Myrick Howard, president of Preservation North Carolina, a nonprofit that restores historic structures, said there is often resistance to talking about slavery. When his group announced plans several years ago to restore the slave quarters at Bellamy Mansion in Wilmington, Howard said some local donors balked. He said the group had to go outside Wilmington to raise much of the $400,000 required.

"There are a lot of people who would be perfectly happy if this subject went away and was never discussed again," Howard said.

But Howard said his group thinks it is crucial to save the physical reminders of slavery.

"We want to root it in reality, so it's no longer an intangible thing," Howard said. "These buildings are heading toward 150 years old, but that's only a handful of generations. It's incredibly important to touch the fabric and understand that."

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**A SAMPLING OF BLACK HISTORY MONTH**

Many events are planned in the region in connection with Black History Month. Here is a sample:

**EVERY SATURDAY IN FEBRUARY:**

African American History Tour, N.C. Museum of History, 1:30 p.m
Visit several exhibits to learn about the lives and accomplishments of African-Americans in North Carolina.

FEB. 18
Black Business/Health Expo, Paul A. Johnston Auditorium at Johnston County Community College, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Local businesses and health professionals will offer information about their services.

FEB. 19
Appraised, Bartered and Sold: The Value of Human Chattels, N.C. Museum of History, 7 p.m.
Daina Ramey Berry, professor of history at Michigan State University, discusses slave prices in the antebellum South. Admission is $5.

FEB. 25
Gospel/Arts Fest, Paul A. Johnston Auditorium at Johnston County Community College, 4 p.m.

Features community choirs, mime, dance groups and a special performance of The Magic of African Rhythm.

FEB. 28
Black History Knowledge Bowl, Baptist Grove Church, 7109 Leesville Road, Raleigh, noon to 5 p.m.

Second annual quiz bowl held by Future Black Men of America. To participate, register by Feb. 20 at www.futureblackmen.org or by calling 210-3516.

BY THE NUMBERS

North Carolina plantations, ranked by the number of times slavery is mentioned on their Web sites.

Latta, 332
Somerset, 137
Stagville, 105
Rosedale, 79
Hope, 48
Mendenhall, 29
Blount Bridger, 6
Poplar Grove, 5
Darshana, 4
Burnside, 2
Green River, 1
Historic Burke, 1
Orton, 1
Ayr Mount, 0
Magnolia Manor, 0
Averasboro, 0
China Grove, 0
Duplin, 0
Joel Lane House, 0
Mordecai Historic Park, 0

Related Content

- Map: Historic plantations in North Carolina

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