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Study: Cancer risk higher in flat colon growths

By Carla K. Johnson  
The Associated Press

CHICAGO — Flat growths on the colon wall are more common in Americans than previously thought and more likely to be cancerous than the more familiar knobby masses known as polyps, a new study finds.

New techniques can locate and remove the flat growths, but many doctors aren’t aware of their cancer risk and may not know how to look for them. The findings are likely to change the practice of colonoscopy, experts said, and may explain some colon cancers that arise between colonoscopies.

“Think it is very important. It’s going to intensify the need for quality screening. You’re not going to be able to do seven-minute colonoscopies.”

Dr. Stephen Hanauer  
gastroenterologist

The growths tend to be smaller when they are cancerous — the size of a nickel instead of a quarter — and are level with the colon wall or depressed like a pothole. They blend in with the surrounding tissue and are difficult to spot.

“They look like a pancake just lying on the floor,” said the study’s lead author, Dr. Roy Soetikno of the Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System in California.

Doctors have known about flat growths but haven’t recognized their danger, experts said.

While knobby polyps were found in four times as many participants, more than half the colon cancers found — 15 of 28 — were in flat and depressed growths. Thirteen were in polyps.

Researchers found the flat growths were nearly 10 times more likely to be cancerous than the polyps. They believe the growths represent a separate colon cancer pathway, rather than being precursors to knobby polyps, Soetikno said. The study appears in Wednesday’s Journal of the American Medical Association.

Since the 1980s, Japanese doctors have reported more flat colon growths than were seen in the United States, but Western scientists doubted their importance, said Dr. David Lieberman of the Oregon Health and Science University in Portland, who wrote an editorial in the journal.

“This paper will have a big impact on gastroenterology,” Lieberman said. “It will heighten people’s awareness that, yes, these are found in United States.”

The findings came from colonoscopies of more than 1,800 mostly male veterans who were seen at one VA center from July 2003 to June 2004. Doctors involved had been trained by Japanese specialists to use a dye during colonoscopies to spot flat growths. One-third of the patients were coming in for routine screening. The rest either had symptoms such as bleeding or pain, or were being screened because they had previous polyps or a family history of colon cancer.

Flat and depressed growths were detected in 170 patients, nearly 10 percent. Meanwhile, knobby polyps were found in 675 patients, about 37 percent.

Colorectal cancer is the nation’s second leading cancer killer. The American Cancer Society estimates 49,960 people will die from it this year. Screening can save lives by finding growths before they turn cancerous.

Colonoscopies, considered the gold standard test, are recommended every 10 years, starting at age 50. A doctor snaks a long, thin tube equipped with a small video camera through the large intestine to view the lining. Colorectal cancer is considered slow-growing so 10 years between screenings is usually enough to catch early growths.

Undetected flat growths could explain some mysterious “interval cancers” that show up between screenings in people who have regular colonoscopies, experts said.

“They get an exam and, they’re clean, and at the next exam they have cancer,” Hanauer said.

The findings, along with prior research showing that doctors who take more time during a colonoscopy find more growths, underline the importance of high-quality screening, Hanauer said. The high rate of cancer in the flat growths warrants further research, said Dr. Asad Umar of the National Cancer Institute.

“Techniques that can better identify and address these lesions are needed,” Umar said.

The study was funded by the Palo Alto Institute for Research and Education, a nonprofit associated with the Palo Alto VA.
Police: University lockdown caused by a hoax

The Associated Press

BOONE — The report of a gunman that led to a lockdown at Appalachian State University was a hoax and the student who called police could be charged with filing a false report, police said Tuesday.

"He's a nice kid who did something stupid," said Matt Stevens, an investigator with the Boone Police Department. Stevens said the 22-year-old senior English major admitted to making up the report while he was being questioned Tuesday morning. He told police on Monday that he interrupted an attempted break in at his off-campus apartment, near the school's Holmes Convocation Center.

"The motive, generally speaking, was he maintains he found his door damaged when he came home," Stevens said. "But he admits there was no man or armed man. He went to report it to his management and believed he would be held responsible. It sort of snowballed."

The report led the school to issue an alert that a white male in a black Pink Floyd T-shirt and wearing a dark jacket and ski mask was seen near campus with a small black handgun.
Jerry Linwood
McLawhorn Jr.

Mr. Jerry Linwood
McLawhorn Jr., 54, passed away Sunday, March 2, 2008.

The funeral service will be conducted on Thursday at 3:30
in the Wilkerson Funeral Chapel. Burial will follow in
Pinewood Memorial Park.

Linwood, a native and life-long Pitt County resident,
served his country in the United States Army for five
years. He later worked for
East Carolina University with
the facility services and then
with Cayton and Associates in
New Bern as a plumbing
supervisor. He was a member
of the Mount Pleasant Chris-
tian Church, Loyal Order of
Moose and president of Land-
owners Hunting Club. He was
family oriented, an avid out-
doorsman, who loved fishing,
hunting and snow skiing.

Linwood loved all dogs, but
especially his two grand-dogs,
Lara and Dixie.

He was preceded in death
by his maternal mother,
Hazel S. Norton and brother,
Denny A. Grimsley.

He is survived by his
daughter, Ramona Waters
and fiancé, Sam Gee, of
Greenville; parents, Jerry
and Lila McLawhorn of
Greenville; sisters, Patricia
Elks and husband, Wayne,
and Wendy Tucker both of
Greenville; brother, Mike
Grimsley of Greenville; three
nephews, David Tucker, Pre-
ston Elks, and Michael Grims-
ley; and two nieces, Jennifer
Smith and Carrie Elks.

The family will receive
friends tonight from 6-8 at
Wilkerson Funeral Home and
other times at the home of
Jerry and Lila McLawhorn.

Memorials may be made to
Moose Heart Foundation, c/o
Greenville Moose Lodge, 5393
Reedy Branch Road, Winter-
ville, NC 28590
Fired press aide: Easley office wanted e-mail killed

BY DAN KANE
AND MICHAEL BIESECKER
STAFF WRITERS

The N.C. Department of Health and Human Services' public affairs director, who was fired Tuesday, said that Gov. Mike Easley's press office instructed the chief spokesmen for executive branch agencies to destroy e-mail correspondence to his office.

"The governor's office, press office, to bypass the public records laws, they ask the second, you e-mail them anything, to kill it, then kill it again out of your trash so it doesn't exist," said Debbie Crane. "That's what they tell all the public affairs people, that they don't want to create any public records."

Seth Effron, a spokesman for Easley, denied Crane's allegations.

"This office has never told anybody to destroy any public record," Effron said. He also said that Crane had been "dishonest, untruthful and insubordinate," and had hindered reporters from getting information from the department. He declined to elaborate.

Crane, a public information officer for 18 years, was fired amidst the fallout from a News & Observer investigation of the state's mental-health system. Her contention, if true, shows a violation of the state's public records law, said Amanda Martin, an attorney for the N.C. Press Association and The News & Observer.

"Any public employee who has an e-mail account or a computer that contains information related to public business is duty bound to preserve that information and those documents under our state public records law," she said.

At the News & Observer's request, attorney Hugh Stevens wrote a letter late Tuesday to the governor's chief

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of staff, Franklin Freeman, demanding that Easley tell state employees and officials to "preserve all email messages and other communications sent or received by them in connection with the conduct of their public duties and responsibilities."

Crane said three different communications directors under Easley delivered the reminder routinely to top public information officers in closed meetings at the governor's office. Killing the messages quickly would make them harder to retrieve. She never saw the instructions in writing.

Crane said she did not kill e-mail messages because she thought doing so would violate the public records law.

Several public information officers representing state agencies said they had not been told to kill e-mail. Two produced copies of e-mail they had sent to the governor's office.

One public information officer said he routinely kills nearly all of his e-mail at the end of each day. "I just don't keep them," said Ernie Seneca, chief spokesman for the state Department of Transportation. "I clean the system." Seneca said he never uses e-mail to communicate with the governor's office, preferring to telephone or visit in person.

Keith Acree, a public information officer with the Department of Correction, also said he uses the phone. "It's the easiest way to do business, I guess," Acree said. "It's quicker to pick up the phone sometimes than write something." He also provided e-mail he had sent to the governor's office.

N&O reporters have made numerous requests to the governor's office for e-mail and written correspondence on several controversial matters, only to be told there were few or no records available.

Advice to former chief

Crane said her dismissal revolved around the Easley administration's attempts to get Carmen Hooker Odom, the former health and human services secretary, to talk to The News & Observer about what the administration says was her opposition to the 2001 mental-health reforms.

Easley has argued that his administration and appointees fought the reforms, which cost taxpayers about $400 million in wasted money and degraded care for the mentally ill.

Crane said that the governor fired her despite attempts by DHHS Secretary Dempsey Benton to find her another position.

Effron said that Crane was dismissed because she persuaded Hooker Odom to change her mind and not talk to The N&O. "She openly and covertly encouraged employees and former employees not to cooperate with the press," he said.
ASU gunman story returns to bite its creator

BY ERIC FERRERI
STAFF WRITER

In the end, the lies piled up too fast for Matthew W. Haney to handle.

The Appalachian State University senior's attempt to avoid paying for a damaged apartment door led him to fabricate a story of a masked gunman in a Pink Floyd T-shirt running toward the Boone campus, police say. That prompted authorities to lock down the college for more than an hour Monday evening.

Haney's lies then continued with a series of television interviews. It wasn't until Tuesday morning, when he was grilled by a Boone detective, that Haney conceded that it had all been a hoax — a creative yarn that got away from him.

"If embarrassment could be measured on a scale, it would be off the charts,' said Matt Stevens, the Boone police detective who elicited Haney's confession. "He did not think this could happen.

The 22-year-old English major will likely be charged this week with filing a false police report, Stevens said. Haney faces a campus judicial hearing as well.

Police say Haney found damage to the door of his off-campus apartment Monday afternoon. Fearing he'd be fined for it, he told his apartment manager that he'd been burglarized and that the door must have been damaged. The manager suggested that Haney call police, so the student told authorities his tale of an armed intruder with a dark mask, a Pink Floyd T-shirt and red-and-green shoes who fled in the direction of the ASU campus.

The campus of more than 14,000 students was shut down quickly. Police also received reports from others on campus of a man who fit the general description of the alleged gunman — a 6-foot-tall man in a white T-shirt — but without a mask or gun.

Meanwhile, reporters arrived at Haney's door, and he was happy to talk.

"All I did was, as soon as I saw the gun, I ran,' he told WRAL-TV of Raleigh.

Given the chance to end the madness, Haney instead fed it, Stevens said.

"He had chances to stop it,' the detective said. "There were so many points. I'm sure he's kicking himself. If it was simply an innocent mistake, he could have rectified it.

That's what bothers Forrest Gilliam, Appalachian State's student body president. Gilliam said he sympathized with Haney but is frustrated that the saga went on as long as it did. Helicopters hovered overhead, and students received calls from panicky parents who monitored news reports. Before long, phone lines were overloaded.

15 minutes of fame

"He saw what his lie was doing,' said Gilliam, a senior from Marshall. "He seemed to be enjoying his time on camera.'

In some news reports, Haney was identified as being from Durham. Stevens said Haney told him that he was originally from Raleigh but that his parents now live in Greenville. Haney did not respond to an e-mail request for comment Tuesday.

Along with the misdemeanor charge, he could face university sanctions ranging from community service to probation to suspension, according to campus officials.

"Under our code of student conduct, he has certainly violated several rules,' said Lynn Drury, associate vice chancellor for university communications.

She said she had no idea how much the false report cost ASU, but at least the campus was able to thoroughly test new safety procedures and systems implemented after the killings at Virginia Tech last year. ASU's first e-mail alert to students, faculty and staff went out 24 minutes after police responded to the student's initial call, Drury said.

The university issued several updates on its Web site and canceled classes Monday night. After nearly an hour and a half, the university withdrew the alert.

"You can't do what we did without knowing the end,' Drury said of the lockdown decision. "We would do the same thing again and hopefully do it better.

Bring on the sirens

University officials learned a few things during the situation, Drury said. For instance, ASU would probably get only one chance to distribute a message to cell phones during a disaster event. After that, the system would be jammed. Redundant communication systems are necessary, and the university plans to install a siren system.

"We certainly identified some bugs we need to work out,' Drury said. "We probably got a B-minus.'

Though the lockdown occurred late in the afternoon, some classes were in session, and some professors weren't sure how to handle the situation — they allowed students to walk the halls, go to the bathroom and pass by windows, said Gilliam, the student body president.

But overall, there was little panic, he added. Students exchanged text messages, and many holed up in computer labs to watch updates roll in on the university Web site.

Still, the rumor mill did prove disturbing and inaccurate at times, causing stress until the lockdown was lifted, Gilliam said.

"Things were being said that just weren't true,' he said. "A lot of people thought there was a gunman loose on campus.'

Staff writer Jane Stancill contributed to this report.

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No evidence has surfaced to show that Hooker Odom opposed the bill, although Easley told reporters late last year — and again Tuesday — that she had vigorously opposed the legislation.

Crane said Hooker Odom contacted her in January to discuss talking to The N&O. Crane said she e-mailed her that, “These stories are going to be terrible. It’s up to you. I wouldn’t call them back.”

Hooker Odom, who works for a nonprofit in New York City, did not return a call to her office Tuesday. She has not responded to numerous calls over the past two months.

Crane, 48, was paid $86,129 a year. Two top mental-health officials whose actions had come under fire were treated much better.

Mike Moseley, the former director of the mental health division was fired, Crane said, but will be allowed to work for several more months; he is paid $131,430 annually.

Seth P. Hunt Jr., the chief executive officer of Broughton Hospital in Morganton, was demoted in December after he failed to report four patient deaths to regulators, a violation of state law. Regulators cut off federal money to the hospital, which is costing state taxpayers about a million dollars a month. He also spent thousands of dollars to remodel his office with bulletproof glass and panic buttons. His current salary is $98,567.

In a tearful interview, Crane said her firing was unjust.

“You showed ... a huge amount of tax dollars wasted on silly services that didn’t help anybody, and then you had people who died or got beaten up really badly, and the only person who is really being held accountable is me,” Crane said. “And my only sin was helping you.”

Staff writers Ben Nolet and Pat Stith contributed to this report.
A little bit too realistic

What were Elizabeth City State University officials thinking when they sent a phony gunman into a classroom, threatening to kill?

The stunt was a drill, but a professor and his terrified students didn’t know that. And with nightmarish images of mass killings at Virginia Tech and, more recently, Northern Illinois University still etched in people’s minds, who could blame the class for fearing the worst?

According to The News & Observer of Raleigh, the “intruder” burst in on an unsuspecting professor and his class late last month, held a toy gun on the professor, lined up several students against the wall and threatened to kill the one with the lowest grade point average. Some students considered jumping out a window, while others frantically sent text messages to parents before the campus cavalry came to the (simulated) rescue.

The incident occurred a little more than a week after an unbalanced man opened fire at Northern Illinois, killing five students before shooting himself.

Although e-mails and text messages warned of the Elizabeth City State drill days in advance, not everyone got the word — illustrating a weakness of relying on technology for mass notification. In this case, a few old-fashioned methods, such as classroom and dormitory announcements, might have helped reduce the fear factor. And perhaps the gunman didn’t need to be quite so true to character once he got into the classroom.

These days, sadly, campus police need to be prepared for the unthinkable. Drills provide practice. But it might be wise to be a bit less realistic.
Blue Cross doles out millions in bonuses

State's largest health insurer paid $7.2 million to its top executives

BY TIM SIMMONS
STAFF WRITER

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina, the state's largest health insurer, paid $7.2 million in performance bonuses last year, leading to double-digit pay increases for about half of the company's top officers.

Pay increases at the nonprofit came during a year that saw net income rise about 10 percent to $209 million. Total revenue also rose, from $4.4 billion to a record $4.9 billion.

Frederick Goldwater, who retired as senior vice president of commercial and government operations, received the largest increase among the top 10 executives, according to an annual report released by state regulators Tuesday. His $1.3 million salary was a 33 percent increase over the previous year.

Blue Cross spokesman Lew Borman said much of that increase was part of Goldwater's retirement package.

Four others received increases from 10 percent to 62 percent, according to the filing. Those changes were part of an administrative reorganization that increased the number of people and programs reporting to each of the administrators, Borman said.

Blue Cross paid its chief executive, Robert J. Greczyn Jr., $3.2 million in 2007—a modest salary increase.

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of 4 percent compared with the 22 percent increase he received in 2006.

Largely because of its nonprofit status, Blue Cross has drawn criticism from consumer advocates and some lawmakers over executive pay.

Adam Searing, director of the N.C. Health Access Coalition and a frequent Blue Cross critic, said most ratepayers aren't likely to be impressed by the explanation that officers of the company took on extra duties.

"People who are facing 10 percent increases in their health insurance rates could care less about excuses from Blue Cross executives about why they are getting double-digit salary increases," Searing said. "It appears the economy is doing just fine at the top of the health insurance industry."

Insurance rates for members varied greatly in 2007 depending on individual plans, but increases were typically "in the high single digits" last year, Borman said.

Borman said the company reduced expenses when measured as a percentage of operating revenue. Its profit margin was flat at about 4.3 percent. Roughly 84 cents out of every $1 in premiums was spent on medical care — a slight increase from 2006.

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A hot primary season could be in N.C.'s forecast

North Carolina voters may help pick the next president for the first time in a generation — a case of the tail wagging the presidential dog.

Illinois Sen. Barack Obama seemed unlikely to deliver a knock-out blow to New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton on Tuesday night, increasing the likelihood that an Obama-Clinton race will still be going strong by the time North Carolina's presidential primary is held May 6.

North Carolina is the second-richest prize remaining before Democrats gather at their national convention Aug. 25 through 28 in Denver to choose their nominee. North Carolina has 134 delegates, Pennsylvania, which holds its primary April 22, has 188.

With Clinton's victory in Rhode Island and strong showings in Ohio and Texas, it's becoming more likely — although it's not a certainty — that she and Obama will wage a full-scale campaign here, complete with numerous appearances, TV and radio ads and the attention of the national media. It is a familiar snowy scene in such early states as Iowa and New Hampshire but a rare Southern spring tableau.

"There is a good chance she carries on at least until Pennsylvania," said Peter Francia, a political science professor at East Carolina University. "If she stays strong through Pennsylvania, he said, the North Carolina race will be hot.

For the Republicans, however, the contest is over, with Arizona Sen. John McCain winning the nomination Tuesday.

A full-fledged Obama-Clinton race could change the chemistry of North Carolina's other Democratic primaries, including contests for governor, the U.S. Senate, Council of State and the legislature.

If other state primaries are any guide, North Carolina will likely see a surge in voter interest, particularly among African-Americans, young voters and unaffiliated voters, who are allowed to vote in Democratic or Republican primaries.

Obama would likely have a built-in advantage in North Carolina, in part because of state's sizable African-American population. In a Democratic primary, black voters typically make up just under 30 percent — although that could grow as high as 35 percent in a race involving Obama, the first serious African-American presidential candidate.

A recent statewide poll conducted for the Civitas Institute, a conservative think tank in Raleigh, found Obama leading Clinton in North Carolina, 36 percent to 24 percent, with 36 percent undecided.

Many of North Carolina's delegates are awarded by congressional districts. Obama might do well in districts with sizable African-American populations and more liberal-leaning urban areas such as the Triangle. Clinton might do better in whiter, more rural districts.

"Obama is likely to do well in urban communities, in Durham County and places like that," Francia said. "What is interesting is where rural America will go. On Super Tuesday, Hillary Clinton won the rural areas. But if you look at the rural vote in South Carolina and Virginia, Barack Obama won there. That vote is very much for grabs."

A continued Obama-Clinton race is likely to put pressure on North Carolina's top elected leaders, including the superdelegates, to endorse either Obama or Clinton in a primary.

A coalition of voters based in Chapel Hill called Voters for Obama announced Tuesday that it was undertaking a petition drive to pressure superdelegates including U.S. Reps. David Price and Brad Miller and Gov. Mike Easley to back Obama.

Former Sen. John Edwards, who suspended his presidential campaign in January, would be under pressure to endorse. Both Clinton and Obama have visited him in his home outside Chapel Hill.

A competitive presidential race could also have an important impact on North Carolina races, by producing a wave of new voters excited by the presidential campaign.

The conventional wisdom is that a high turnout could benefit Lt. Gov. Beverly Perdue in her Democratic primary for governor with state Treasurer Richard Moore. Perdue is leading in the polls primarily because of her strong support among women and African-Americans — two groups likely to show up in big numbers.

Moore has sought to counter this by backing Obama. He is the only major statewide official to endorse.

North Carolina has not been a player in primary politics since 1988, when North Carolina was part of the Democrats' first Super Tuesday — a group of Southern states that banded together to play a larger role in the presidential states. North Carolina voted for Tennessee Sen. Al Gore that year, but state voters ultimately had little effect. Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis won the nomination.

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