THE DAILY CLIPS

June 12, 2008

News, commentary, and opinion
compiled by the East Carolina University News Bureau from:

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ECU gets updates on new facilities

By Tom Marine
The Daily Reflector

New facilities were the hot topic at Wednesday's meeting for the Health Sciences Committee for East Carolina University's Board of Trustees.

The committee's agenda included updates regarding the new Family Medicine Center, East Carolina Heart Institute and the possible development of a breast center.

Phyllis Horsa, interim vice chancellor for Health Sciences and interim dean of the Brody School of Medicine, told committee members about the status of the heart institute, saying it should open in September.

As for the legislative progress on the new Family Medicine Center, Dr. Nicholas Benson, vice-dean of the Brody School, said both the House budget and Senate budget provide funding for building the facility. If all goes to plan, Benson said, construction should begin sometime late this year.

Brian Jowers, executive director for ECU Physicians, said there have been preliminary discussions about developing a breast center as a way to bring mammography and physicians together.

ECU Physicians had a strong financial performance during the month of May.

Jowers said during his report that revenue was about $500,000 above budget for the month, highlighting a trend in rising professional fee charges.

According to the financial performance summary, the medical practice is roughly $900,000 behind budget for the year, partly due to chemo drug revenues.

Jowers presented the committee with a survey reporting customer satisfaction for patients who came to clinics for appointments.

Overall, the survey showed

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that 83 percent of respondents characterized their experience as excellent or very good, and 85 percent selected an excellent or very good likelihood of recommending the clinic.

Jowers said two areas to improve are wait times in the reception and exam rooms.

"We should have two or three more surveys by next year at this time," Jowers said. "This is not where I want us to be. By then, I hope to be in the 90-percent range (for customer satisfaction)."

The committee also discussed the affiliation agreement between Pitt County Memorial Hospital and Brody.

David Brody, vice chair of the ECU Board of Trustees, voiced his concern over the philosophical differences on that document.

He said since PCMH and the medical school are partners, each should be treated like preferred partners instead of competitors.

"It's about the document, but it's not," said Dr. Michael Rotondo, professor and chairman of the department of surgery at the Brody School. "It's about our overall direction in the future."

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U.S. life expectancy tops 78
as top diseases decline

By Mike Stobbe
The Associated Press

Atlanta

For the first time, U.S. life expectancy has surpassed 78 years, the government reported Wednesday, although the United States continues to lag behind about 30 other countries in estimated life span.

The increase is due mainly to falling mortality rates in almost all the leading causes of death, federal health officials said. The average life expectancy for babies born in 2006 was about four months greater than for children born in 2005.

Japan has the longest life expectancy — 83 years for

"The international comparisons are not that appealing, but we may be in the process of catching up," said Samuel Preston, a University of Pennsylvania demographer. He is co-chairman of a National Research Council panel looking at why America's life expectancy is lower than other nations.

The new U.S. data, released Wednesday, come from the National Center for Health Statistics.

It's a preliminary report of 2006 numbers, based on data from more than 95 percent of the death certificates collected that year.

Life expectancy is the period a child born in 2006 is expected to live, assuming mortality trends stay constant.

The 2006 increase is due mainly to falling mortality rates for nine of the 15 leading causes of death, including heart disease, cancer, accidents and diabetes.

"I think the most surprising thing is that we had declines in just about every major cause of death," said Robert Anderson, who oversaw work on the report for the health statistics center.

The overall death rate fell from 799 per 100,000 in 2005 to about 776 the following year.

Health statisticians noted declines of more than 5 percent in stroke and chronic lung respiratory disease (including bronchitis and emphysema), and a drop of more than 5 percent in heart disease and diabetes deaths. Indeed, the drop in diabetes deaths was steep enough to allow Alzheimer's disease — which held about steady — to pass diabetes to become the nation's sixth leading cause of death.

The U.S. infant mortality rate dropped more than 2 percent, to 6.7 infant deaths per 1,000 births, from 6.9.

Perhaps the most influential factor in the 2006 success story, however, was the flu. Flu and pneumonia deaths dropped by 13 percent from 2005, reflecting a mild flu sea-

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Life expectancy was up for both men and women, and whites and blacks. Although the gaps are closing, women continue to live longer, almost to 81, compared to about 75 for men. Among racial categories, white women have the highest life expectancy (81 years), followed by black women (about 77 years), white men (76) and black men (70). Health statisticians said they don't have reliable data to calculate Hispanic life expectancy, but they hope to by next year.

About 2.4 million Americans died in 2006, according to the report.
Carson autopsy to be released

Other documents could be, too

By Jesse James DeConto
Staff Writer

HILLSBOROUGH — New facts about Eve Carson’s killing will be available to the public by the end of this month.

Superior Court Judge Allen Baddour ruled Wednesday that Carson’s autopsy report can become public June 30, the expiration of a 60-day seal requested by District Attorney Jim Woodall to protect the police investigation and the state’s cases against suspects Demario Atwater and Lawrence Lovette.

In response, The News & Observer withdrew a motion to unseal the medical report.

“We see no reason to take up the court’s time and energy to deal with an issue that apparently will become moot in a few days,” the paper’s attorney, Hugh Stevens, wrote in a letter to Baddour.

“Therefore, we respectfully ask that the intervention motions be withdrawn . . . without prejudice to

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Baddour reads that defense attorneys don’t object to unsealing the autopsy.

Staff Photo by Harry Lynch

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their being renewed in the event of a further motion to seal evidence or records in either case.”

Additionally, search warrants and another unknown document could be made public June 27, a hearing date that was set in April for Baddour to consider unsealing those records.

Baddour reviewed Carson’s autopsy report and decided it should remain sealed until June 30.

Woodall said keeping information from the public helps police narrow their investigation.

“If somebody can provide information that only police have, that means that’s a lead they can concentrate on,” he said.

Woodall said investigators have interviews with witnesses scheduled as late as June 27, but after that, they no longer need to maintain secrecy.

“Requesting that a public record be sealed is a big step to take,” Woodall said. “[Investigators] assured me that if they were given 60 days, that they could complete all of the interviews.”

The autopsy report is expected to say how many times Carson, the UNC-Chapel Hill student body president, was shot. It might also describe the weapon or weapons used.

The search warrants will show what investigators found when they searched dwellings associated with Atwater and Lovette.

Chapel Hill police responded to a report of gunfire and found Carson’s body in a wooded neighborhood near campus about 5 a.m. March 5.

Police have said she was shot multiple times, including once in the right temple. Within days of the shooting, police released security-camera photographs of Atwater and Lovette.

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Read More, Listen
Hear what Judge Allen Baddour said from the bench, and read more stories about Eve Carson at newsobserver.com/news.
Nursing advocates say state will suffer if it cuts program

BY SARA H AVERY
STAFF WRITER

With a nursing shortage looming in North Carolina, a state-funded group that develops strategies to find nurses may shut down at the end of the month for lack of money from the General Assembly.

The N.C. Center for Nursing — founded in 1991 to avoid nursing shortages that have periodically crippled hospitals, nursing homes, mental institutions and home health care services — was not included in the state House budget passed last week.

Advocates for the center were in Raleigh on Wednesday trying to persuade Senate leaders to include funding in their budget, which will likely be presented next week.

At issue is $500,000, which funds the center’s research and pays the salaries of six staff members.

"That’s a drop in the bucket," said Cherry Beasley, chairwoman of the center’s board of directors and a nurse educator at UNC-Pembroke.

The budget cut is the result of the center’s unique structure. It’s funded under the University of North Carolina system, but doesn’t operate as a purely ed-

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ucational program. So it slips outside the system’s priorities.

Rep. Marian McLawhorn, a Democrat from Pitt County who co-chairs the House’s education appropriation committee, said she supports the center, but did not make a move to include it on the committee’s budget. As the budget progressed, she said, there were other opportunities to add funding, but no one took the initiative. Now it’s up to the Senate.

“The legislative appropriations process is intense, and it’s intense because there are so many worthy requests that are out there,” McLawhorn said. Funding one thing, she said, means taking money from another.

Supporters of the center, which was the first established by any state, say it helped North Carolina fare better than other states during national nursing shortages. Soon after the center’s inception, the state began strongly outpacing the national average, with 82.2 nurses per 100,000 population in North Carolina, compared to 82.5 per 100,000 people nationally in 2006, the last year for which figures are available.

“Our whole focus is ... to avoid a crisis,” said Linda M. Lacey, associate director of research for the center. “We have been successful in doing that.”

The center collects data, surveys employers and tracks where and what kinds of nurses are needed. It then works with nursing schools at the state’s four-year colleges and two-year community colleges to gear up programs that will meet those needs.

Lacey said the state now faces a bottleneck that could result in a severe shortage. Many nurses are nearing retirement, just as baby boomers are aging into a stage in life where they’ll need more nursing care. And nursing schools are losing veteran teachers, and there are not enough nurses with advanced degrees moving into the teaching ranks.

So, even though many colleges and community colleges have waiting lists of students wanting to enter nursing programs, they don’t have enough teachers to expand the programs.

“It’s an incredible problem,” said Robert Morrison, a member of the center’s board of directors and president of Randolph Hospital in Asheboro. Morrison said the nursing center has identified the problem and is working on strategies to solve it.

Although nursing schools, hospital groups and even legislators support the center, he said, finding a funding commitment is proving difficult. Wednesday’s meetings with Senate leaders did not ease concerns.

“I’m going to say we’re being listened to politely,” Morrison said, “and we’re encouraged to keep working. But I have not yet talked to anybody who is extremely optimistic that the money will be put back in the budget for it. We’re going to keep working as hard as we can, but I haven’t heard the ‘Yes, we’re going to get this done,’ that I think we need to hear.”

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