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Obesity Surgery May Become Option for Many More

By ANDREW POLLACK

Weight-loss surgery, once a last resort for extremely overweight people, may soon become an option for those who are less heavy.

An advisory committee to the Food and Drug Administration will consider on Friday a request by Allergan, the pharmaceutical company, to significantly lower how obese someone must be to qualify for surgery using the company’s Lap-Band device, which restricts intake to the stomach.

On Wednesday, the F.D.A. acknowledged that a new study by the company showed that people in the proposed range of obesity who had the band experienced “statistically significant decreases in all measures of weight loss.”

If the agency approves the change, the number of Americans eligible for the Lap-Band operation could easily double, ensuring more sales for Allergan and probably more insurance coverage for such operations. But the proposed change, sought at a time when the obesity epidemic in the United States seems intractable, still leaves some people uneasy, in part because of side effects and failure rates. In addition, long-term weight reduction is hard to maintain.

“You’re talking about millions and millions of people who would meet these criteria,” said Dr. George Blackburn, associate director of the division of nutrition at Harvard Medical School. “Let’s make sure by the most rigorous research that this is safe and effective.”

A new generation of diet pills has failed to gain federal approval, limiting options for overweight Americans, and Allergan and other companies are betting that surgery will become more of a frontline option rather than a last resort.

“It would be kind of ironic if people have access to surgery and not medical therapies, where they can go from Weight Watchers to surgery and have
nothing in-between,” said Dr. Louis J. Aronne, an obesity expert at Weill Cornell Medical College. “But it appears it may be the way it will be in the near future.”

Doctors have already started to operate on extremely heavy teenagers, not just adults. And some experts are recasting weight-loss procedures, known as bariatric surgery, as metabolic surgery, saying that it might be justified to treat diabetes, even in people who are barely obese or not obese. Gastric banding involves placing an inflatable silicone ring around the upper part of the stomach, which limits food consumption and makes one feel full faster.

Current guidelines say weight loss surgery is appropriate for people who have failed to lose weight through diet and exercise and have a body mass index, or B.M.I., of 40 and above, or 35 and above if a person has at least one serious health problem, like diabetes or high blood pressure, that is tied to obesity. Allergan wants to lower the threshold for the Lap-Band to a B.M.I. of 35 with no associated health problems and to 30 with such problems.

For instance, a person who is 5 feet 6 inches and has diabetes would have to weigh 216 pounds to qualify now. Under the proposed lower threshold, that person could weigh 30 pounds less, or 186 pounds.

Federal statistics suggest that nearly 20 percent of the adult population has a B.M.I. between 30 and 35, more than double the population above 35. Probably half or more of the people between 30 and 35 have some associated health condition.

Bariatric surgeons and some obesity experts say that surgery has proven to be the only way many people can lose a lot of weight and keep it off, and some cite a Swedish study suggesting that it prolonged lives. And, they say, the operations have become safer since the obesity thresholds were first set in 1991 in a meeting organized by the National Institutes of Health.

“The whole risk-benefit ratio is completely different than it was back then,” said Dr. Marc Bessler, chief of the division of minimally invasive and bariatric surgery at Columbia.

Banding is a less radical operation than the main alternative, the gastric bypass. It is also reversible and costs less — from $12,000 to more than
$20,000, compared with $20,000 to more than $30,000 for a bypass. But banding also leads to a weight loss of about 20 percent on average, less than that of bypass.

Bypass has been the preferred operation in the United States, though Allergan executives said on a recent call with investors that banding now has about 50 percent market share. Within the banding market, Allergan’s Lap-Band has about 70 percent market share, according to the company, with the rest belonging to the Realize Band sold by Ethicon Endo-Surgery, a division of Johnson & Johnson. Allergan’s band was approved in 2001.

To win approval of the lower threshold, Allergan sponsored a study in which 149 of these less obese people had the band implanted. About 80 percent of the participants achieved the goal of losing at least 30 percent of their excess weight, meaning the amount by which they were overweight, after one year.

About 70 percent of patients experienced a side effect, like vomiting or pain. The F.D.A. indicated on Wednesday that it had questions about how meaningful the weight loss was and whether the results of the study would be applicable to people other than the white women who made up a large portion of the participants.

Some doctors are dropping the band, in part because some older studies suggest that up to a third of patients eventually have the band removed because of side effects or ineffective weight loss. While about one in 1,000 patients die within 30 days of surgery, a survey of members of the bariatric surgery society suggested that deaths occurring later are under-reported.

“Before they start putting the Lap-Band on patients who are 50 pounds overweight, the public has to be made aware of how dangerous this is,” said Stephanie Quatinetz, a New York lawyer whose daughter, Rebecca, died at age 27 in August 2009, two months after getting Lap-Band surgery.

One factor that is moving some experts to advocate surgery for lower body mass index levels is its effectiveness in resolving diabetes, hypertension and some other ills associated with obesity.

“There are dramatic metabolic effects that in many cases go well beyond the weight loss effects,” said Dr. Lee M. Kaplan, director of the weight center at Massachusetts General Hospital.
He said that while it was once thought that surgery worked mainly by mechanically restricting how much one can eat, it is becoming clear that gastric bypass, at least, has effects on hormones.

Some experts say body mass index does not adequately measure risk of health problems. For instance, Asians tend to get diabetes at a lower B.M.I. than whites.

“The B.M.I. limitation of 35/40, set in the period when the major objective of the operations was weight control, is no longer the primary appropriate guideline for the selection of candidates for bariatric surgery,” Dr. Walter J. Pories, a surgeon, and colleagues wrote in the journal Obesity earlier this year. Dr. Pories will be a member of the F.D.A. advisory committee on Friday.

Allergan, known mostly for its Botox product, which is approved for cosmetic and medical ailments like chronic migraines, wants to reverse slowing sales of the Lap-Band that the company attributes to the weak economy. In the first nine months of this year, sales of its obesity products, mostly Lap-Band, fell 4 percent, to $182.4 million.

Even if Allergan’s application is approved, perhaps a small fraction of the new candidates are likely to opt for surgery because many people avoid operations. “I don’t think it’s enough to overwhelm the health care system,” said Dr. Bruce Wolfe, president of American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery, whose executive council unanimously endorsed Allergan’s proposal. “That’s not happening with the people who are heavier and need it even more.”

The society says that 220,000 bariatric surgeries of all kinds were performed in the United States last year. That is more than twice as many as in 2003, but represents a small fraction of the potential pool.

Still, some less obese patients do want the surgery. Some online discussion boards tell of people who purposely gained weight to qualify, and some messages give advice to others on wearing hidden weights.

Rashida Brown says she wants surgery to help control her diabetes, high cholesterol and hypertension. But her insurer has refused to pay twice in the
last few years. At the time, Ms. Brown, who is 5 feet 7 inches, weighed 195 to 220 pounds, putting her index below 35.

“I am willing to bet there are quite a few people in the same category as myself — just waiting,” said Ms. Brown, 53, a clinical social worker from Boston.

She may still have to wait, now that she weighs 175 pounds — putting her below even the proposed lower threshold.
ECU officials reach out to ENC towns, military

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John Althouse/The Daily News
Steven Ballard, chancellor at East Carolina University, speaks to alumni and supporters at Jacksonville Country Club Wednesday afternoon as part of the school's outreach to the eastern part of the state.

By HOPE HODGE

The chancellor of East Carolina University told The Daily News Wednesday that the school was exploring ways to improve its relationship with Onslow County and expand its presence in the community surrounding Camp Lejeune.

During a day visit to various organizations in Jacksonville, ECU’s Steve Ballard said reaching out to this region dovetails with the school’s overarching commitment to assisting and supporting local military.

At the beginning of this year, ECU embarked on Operation Re-Entry, a Department of Defense-funded research project focused on assisting troops with the transition from military to civilian life, particularly those suffering from traumatic brain injuries or post-traumatic stress from time in combat.

And in September, it received the Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award, one of only 15 employers across the country recognized for efforts to support staff members who are part of the National Guard or reserves.
Ballard said that while ECU did not yet have a physical presence aboard Camp Lejeune or in the region, university officials were looking for ways to make the school’s offerings more available to the troops.

“(Supporting the military) is one of the marquee things that cuts across all the colleges we have,” Ballard said. “Distance education is our best thing because we’re so good at it. It’s tailor-made for the military.”

ECU’s distance program includes 850 courses and a military outreach program with satellite sites at Fort Bragg, Cherry Point Air Station and Seymour Johnson Air Force Base.

In challenging economic times, school leaders said they also realized the need to increase the variety of their offerings and the ground they cover.

“We’re going to have to be much more diversified and we’re also going to have to, rightly, expand our idea of what our region is,” J. Ted Morris, associate vice chancellor of ECU, said.

That means reviewing the needs of communities within Eastern North Carolina, including this one.

Ballard said the university placed emphasis on training those entering the fields of teaching, health, engineering and construction management, all careers with strong local opportunities for well-educated and competent workers.

And in coming weeks, university officials said, they plan to visit other communities in the region to learn how ECU can best meet their needs, as well as continuing to serve the area’s military constituency.

“It’s a responsibility we think we have to the East,” Ballard said. “Our mission is to be a model of regional trust.”

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Like a kid on Dec. 24, Isaac Morton found it hard to sleep Tuesday night; he knew that an e-mail was on its way. When he opened it the next morning, it was like Christmas.

More than 20 hopeful dental students were greeted Wednesday with invitations to join the inaugural class at East Carolina University's School of Dental Medicine. The school, which began accepting applications this summer for the fall of 2011, extended the first offers of admission to what ultimately will be a class of 50 North Carolina students.

Margaret Wilson, the dental school's associate dean for student affairs, described the men and women receiving notification as a diverse group of students, ranging from their early 20s to mid-30s and representing a number of different undergraduate schools. Four are ECU students, including Morton, a biology and chemistry major. Morton, a Jacksonville native, applied to seven dental schools but said ECU is his first choice.

“It's very surreal for me,” he said in a telephone interview Wednesday. “I can't say enough how grateful I am and how blessed I feel ... how excited I am.”

Wilson said the enthusiasm was evident when faculty and other interview committee members called prospective students Wednesday morning to give them the news. Students also received an electronic status update from the Associated American Dental Schools Application Service and a congratulatory e-mail from ECU. They should receive a letter in the mail in the next day or so.
“They sometimes scream a little bit,” Wilson said of typical student response. “Sometimes they laugh; sometimes they cry. There's a lot of excitement out there. There are a lot of people smiling today,” she said. “It's a momentous occasion for these students. It's really the realization of a dream that many of them have had for quite a few years.”

ECU senior Bianca Speight got a call before 8 a.m., saying she had made the cut. The Apex native had another call by 11, with an offer from the University of Michigan. By Wednesday afternoon, she had received an e-mail offer from the University of Maryland, where she had just completed an interview on Tuesday.

“I wasn't expecting to get in three,” she said, laughing. “It was a shock. I consider myself blessed.”

Greenville native Will Griffin got the good news while he was on the way to the Wilmington-area dental clinic where he has volunteered for the last four years. “I read the e-mail, called my wife, called my dad, called my grandma, called my mom,” said Griffin, a graduate of J.H. Rose High School and the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. “What was neat was to go in the dental clinic and share that with them.”

Community service is one of the areas the dental school considered in determining which of the more than 300 applicants to accept, Wilson said. The dental school has interviewed about 150 prospective students to determine which ones are best qualified to fulfill the mission of the dental school, which is to prepare dental care practitioners to work in underserved regions of the state.

Morton, who joined AmeriCorps two years ago, will have completed more than 2,000 hours of community service by the time he graduates in May. His friend, Kyle Given, who also received an acceptance letter on Wednesday, has spent two years as a missionary in Peru, where he learned to speak Spanish.

“That (fluency in Spanish) has actually been one of my selling points on my application,” Given said, “because ECU's dental school is geared toward proving dentists for rural North Carolina, and there's a great need for the Spanish population.”

Given, a native of Roanoke Rapids, is familiar with the statistic that indicates North Carolina ranks 47th nationally in the number of dentists per capita. One of ECU dental schools' 10 service learning centers, to be located in rural and underserved areas of the state, is planned for Ahoskie, about 20 minutes from Given's hometown.

While Given applied to seven dental schools, ECU is his first choice. The new school also topped the list for Spencer Dail, a Farmville native who became one of the first to apply when ECU began accepting applications in June.
Dail, a student at North Carolina State University, received an offer of admission Wednesday in the form of a phone call from his former orthodontist, Dr. Dennis Ross, who helped interview prospective dental students. Dail, a Greene Central High School graduate, was surprised the offer came so early.

Wednesday was the first day dental schools nationwide began notifying students of their acceptance. Students who received notification have until Jan. 5 to accept the offer. ECU will continue to accept applications until Jan. 15 and hopes to conduct the remaining interviews for prospective students in February.

“We're probably going to end up interviewing 300 people,” Wilson said. “All the other students we've interviewed who are not receiving an offer (Dec. 1), we're sending them an e-mail also, just letting them know their application is still on hold and under active review.”

Griffin, who applied twice for one of the 81 seats at the University of North Carolina School of Dentistry before receiving his acceptance at ECU, is glad the wait is over. He's looking forward to going into the holidays with an acceptance letter in his pocket.

“I've been working very hard for this,” he said. “It's pretty emotional. It's going to be a very good Christmas.”

Contact Kim Grizzard at kgrizzard@reflector.com or (252) 329-9578.
East Carolina publicly accepted an invitation to the Military Bowl during halftime of the ECU-Charlotte men's basketball game Wednesday night at Minges Coliseum. Pictured are, from left, ECU football coach Ruffin McNeill, Military Bowl executive director Steve Beck, ECU chancellor Steve Ballard and ECU athletics director Terry Holland. Scott Davis/The Daily Reflector

Pirates publicly accept bowl bid

By Nathan Summers
The Daily Reflector
Thursday, December 2, 2010

Coaching a team that was picked by some preseason predictors to win as few as two football games this season, East Carolina's Ruffin McNeill doesn't need a reminder to be excited about playing in this year's Military Bowl.

The ECU coach met with athletic director Terry Holland at halfcourt during halftime of Wednesday night's Pirate basketball game to officially accept the bowl's offer, making McNeill the first-ever ECU football coach to guide the Pirates to a bowl in his first season.

"It's an honor to represent East Carolina, the university, our football team and staff and all of our administration," McNeill said after coming off the floor inside Minges Coliseum. "We're looking forward to traveling and bringing the great Pirate spirit to our nation's capital."

After two straight Liberty Bowls in Memphis, Tenn., and a Hawaii Bowl appearance in 2007, this year will be a rare chance for ECU fans to easily drive to a postseason game.

"That's just as special as can be," McNeill said of the opportunity for fans to travel by car to the Washington, D.C.-based bowl game on Dec. 29. "They'll be able to get through the holidays, then they'll be able to get on 95 and head to D.C. in a matter of four hours from Greenville. It's great for our team and our players to know that their families can drive up and see them."

The game is set for a 2:30 p.m. kickoff inside RFK Stadium against an opponent from the Atlantic Coast Conference that has yet to be named.
While there is still a blank on the ACC’s side of the bowl marquee, Military Bowl executive director Steve Beck said there was little hesitation when it came to naming the representative from Conference USA.

“Conference USA has six bowl eligible teams, and I will say that from the beginning of partnering up with Conference USA, we wanted East Carolina,” Beck said. “It's drivable, which is very attractive, it's an exciting team, they love to play the ACC, all of the right combination, and I'm just thrilled that it came to fruition this year.”

McNeill said he knows the East Carolina fan base always plays a factor in selling prospective bowls on the Pirates.

“I think that's always a major factor in bowl selection,” he said. “If you've attended any game in Dowdy-Ficklen, you would see the tremendous fan support we have here.”

The Pirates will add to a school record set last season by playing in their fifth consecutive bowl game, having gone 1-3 in their last four postseason appearances. ECU was mentioned in connection with two other bowls — the New Orleans Bowl and the Beef O'Brady's Bowl in St. Petersburg, Fla. — but according to McNeill, playing in D.C. was the highest priority for the 6-6 Pirates.

“When the Military Bowl showed interest in us, it was really the one that — if we were not able to get into the (Conference USA) championship game — there was no other choice but to go to Washington, D.C.,” he said.

As for an opponent, Beck said it likely will not be determined until Sunday, following the ACC championship game. At midweek, as many as five schools were still being mentioned as possibilities to play in the third installment of the D.C. game, including Georgia Tech, Boston College, Maryland, Miami and Clemson.

Contact Nathan Summers at nsummers@reflector.com or (252)329-9595.
East Carolina University accepted a bid this week to participate in the Military Bowl in Washington, D.C., a fitting reward for an up-and-down season defined by the transition to a new coaching staff. Fans, players and coaches should be proud of the accomplishment and of how they competed throughout the year in Conference USA.

However, most involved with the university want more — not only a greater number of wins, but the opportunity to compete at the highest echelon of the sport. That can only happen with admission to a conference aligned with the Bowl Championship Series, the hopes for which dimmed slightly this week with the entry of Texas Christian University to the Big East Conference.

The BCS emerged in 1998 in an effort to establish a national championship game at the end of the season pitting the two best teams in college football against each other. That goal may seem noble enough, but it effectively split the 116 Division I schools into haves and have-nots since only the six champions of so-called BCS conferences earn automatic spots in one of the five bowl games tied to the system. Successful teams from other conferences have only recently earned entry to those bowls, though they have a much higher barrier to entry in order to qualify.

For a school like East Carolina, that system unfairly restricts the school's access to playing for a national championship should the Pirates finish the season without a loss. In fact, all the teams from Conference USA would find entry to the BCS Championship Game an almost impossible task because those associated with the sport do not think highly of the competition level. That also effectively restricts Conference USA schools from access to the nearly $140 million generated by the BCS. The six BCS conferences split $115.2 million between them following last year's games.
That is incredibly unfair and ideally the BCS system would be discarded in favor of a more egalitarian selection process. In the meantime, however, East Carolina has sought entry into a BCS conference, only to be rebuffed. This week, TCU accepted a bid to the Big East, though East Carolina would be a more natural geographic fit. The conference may add another member, but is considering Villanova and the University of Central Florida rather than the Pirates.

ECU, Greenville and Pitt County all stand to lose from this inherently unequal system. Hope springs eternal in eastern North Carolina, but it is dimming.
The Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity has revoked the charter of its 50-year-old ECU chapter for failing to meet organizational standards, officials said Wednesday.

The national organization withdrew the charter of the North Carolina Kappa chapter at East Carolina University after its members over several years failed to live up to academic and character expectations, said Keith Tingley, director of Greek life at ECU.

The news comes nearly two years after a fire burned the fraternity's annex in January 2009. The chapter was put on suspension in fall 2009 after officials reviewed its membership and created a plan to reorganize.

Recent violations of the terms of the suspension prompted the decision to shutter the chapter, fraternity officials said. There are about 50 to 60 active members. The fraternity declined to elaborate, but ECU officials said the decision also was based in part on several alcohol-related incidents and allegations of hazing that were never proved.

“We're all disappointed they had to be closed,” Tingley said. “We're looking forward to opening it back up as soon as the current members graduate.”

“We have, I think, high expectations for our membership,” said Brian Warren, executive director of the fraternity's national office in Richmond, Va. “We expect them to provide a healthy and safe environment for our members. ... We had a history of a failure to do that at ECU and we have a responsibility to address that.

“There were a string of incidents,” Warren said. “It was not one specific thing that triggered this decision.”

The house at 505 E. Fifth St. will be leased until the fraternity returns to campus. The home recently underwent a renovation after the 2009 fire forced the “back house” at 406 Summit St. to be rebuilt.

No one was hurt in the fire, which was blamed on a misuse of electrical equipment on the first floor. Tangled cords were discovered connected to lights and appliances, including a space heater.

Established in 1901, Sigma Phi Epsilon is one of the nation's largest fraternities, with more than 15,000 undergraduates on 240 campuses, officials said.
The national organization said it revokes two to three charters on average per year. It is estimated the fraternity could return to ECU in three to five years.

In the last five years, two fraternities — Sigma Phi Epsilon and Lambda Chi Alpha — have lost charters, university officials said.

Members of the Sig Ep chapter plan to appeal, said Mike Upchurch, chapter alumni president. The appeal will be heard by fraternity's board of directors in April.

“The guys in that chapter today, they are a group of very high-quality guys and we think that it is situation where the behavior of a few has affected the goodness of the larger group,” he said.

“We'll support their appeal. If for some reason we don't win the appeal, we will plan to return as soon as practically possible.”

Contact Jennifer Swartz at jswartz@reflector.com or (252) 329-9565.
Before she ever got sick, was valedictorian, graduated college with honors, reacquainted herself with the man who would become the love of her life or, against the odds, completed medical school, Anna Woodall Hudson was the student in Darlene Williford's fifth-grade class who looked out for everyone else.

"She was a 10-year-old tiny, petite little girl, bubbly personality; even then she was destined to help other people," says Williford. "She'd finish her work, do it well, and then help others. And not just her friends. She would help anyone."

Woodall Hudson expected perfection from herself. She went on to set and meet goals that would have seemed impossible after developing a severe autoimmune disease as a teenager. And while that eventually contributed to her death, it also helped her excel at one of the things she most wanted: to be a doctor.

Woodall Hudson was 30 and halfway through her family medicine residency when she died in September.
"She particularly wanted to be a doctor after becoming sick," said her father, Hal Woodall, himself a physician. "She wanted to be the kind of doctor who made patients feel comfortable, who responded to the patient's feelings."

"She definitely saw the medical career as a calling," said her husband, Keith Hudson. "She saw herself going through all she had gone through to be able to help other people in those situations as well."

**Family photographer**
The youngest of three daughters, Woodall Hudson grew up in Kenly and excelled academically, with a near-photographic memory and a love for taking the real thing.

"She was our family picture-taker. It was very important to her that she chronicle our family in photographs," said her mother, Sara Woodall.

In her junior year at North Johnston High School, she became ill with alarming symptoms: extreme fatigue, headaches, loss of appetite, nausea and hives. Tests showed life-threatening abnormalities in her blood.

Not all the physicians they encountered were thoughtful or sympathetic to the young woman whose worries should have been about prom and SATs. It wasn't until she was seen by a specialist at UNC Children's Cancer Center who understood the human side of her illness and communicated with her about it that she felt understood, her mother said.

A combination of medicines allowed her to return to high school and continue on to UNC-Chapel Hill. During this time, she ran into Keith Hudson at a high school basketball game. He'd been a year ahead of her at North Johnston. They began dating and were married in June 2003. That fall Woodall Hudson began classes at the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University, but within a couple of years her fragile health began to worsen.

The symptoms returned and became more complex. When she was too sick to go to class, her father would attend for her and take notes. When she was dehydrated but needed to see patients, she either retreated to a private area to give herself fluids or wore a portable pump and saline pack, which kept her hydrated through a port in her arm.
"You never heard her complain," said Daniel Becerra, a colleague during her residency. Her example is burned on the hearts of those who worked with her, Becerra said, both because of her perseverance and the way she treated patients.

"She provided a new level of care," he said. "She set that level extremely high, and we're all striving for that."

'Dove into your heart'
Despite her illness, she remained methodical and organized. On her geriatric rotation, Woodall Hudson worked with Sara Kalies, a physician's assistant in training.

Woodall Hudson and Kalies clicked professionally and also enjoyed watching the Food Network together, tweaking menus to accommodate Woodall Hudson's allergies.

"She just kind of dove into your heart and found the words. She seemed to enjoy normal life outside of the world of being sick," Kalies said.

In October 2009 came a cancer diagnosis; Woodall Hudson's autoimmune condition and its treatment had left her vulnerable to it. The malignancy, along with the aggressive treatment, were more than her body could battle. Their families rallied around the couple, and those who know them say Woodall Hudson and her husband relied more than ever on their faith - he is a minister - without questioning their circumstances.

Anna Woodall Hudson
Born: Dec. 16, 1979, in Johnston County
Lived: Greenville
Surviving family: Husband, Keith; parents, Hal and Sara Woodall of Kenly; sisters Lisa Johnson of Clayton and Lori Woodall of Kenly; grandmothers Bessie Woodall of Princeton and Gladys Slaughter of Wilson; three nephews; one niece; and other relatives.

Keeping love alive
Anna Woodall Hudson and Keith Hudson were first married on a brilliantly hot June day in 2003 at Kenly Missionary Baptist Church, followed by a reception for 300-plus guests under tents in her parents' backyard.
Woodall Hudson had always wanted to renew those vows on their 10th anniversary, but just seven years later, she was dying and determined. She set the date of Sept. 16 but was so ill by then that she was sometimes barely conscious, and her husband and others doubted she could make it out of bed.

A little more than an hour before a small group of friends and family were to gather with the minister who performed the original ceremony, Woodall Hudson rallied.

"She sort of gathered all the energy she had, all the composure she had and poured it all together," said her husband. "She was just so determined."

Her mother and mother-in-law helped her into a pink dress, applied makeup, and in the living room of their home, the Hudsons renewed their vows.

Not quite done, Woodall Hudson insisted on one last dance to their first song, "Have I Told You Lately That I Love You?" She returned to bed and was never again fully awake, dying that Saturday.
Embattled Duke fights 'wildly distorted image'

Duke University President Richard Brodhead fields questions during a news conference announcing the suspension of the men's lacrosse team schedule in Durham, N.C., Tuesday, March 28, 2006. The highly ranked team won't play again this season until school administrators learn more about allegations that several team members raped an exotic dancer at an off-campus party, the school said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Sara D. Davis)

BY ERIC FERRERI - Staff Writer

DURHAM--Mike Lefevre isn't as much the leader of Duke's student body these days as he is its apologist-in-chief.

That's what happens, he says, when your school keeps getting in the news for all the wrong reasons. Recent salacious, made-for-the-Internet tales of student misadventures have the student government president fighting to convince people that all Dukies aren't tactless, oversexed, drunken buffoons.

"I keep having to say 'it isn't us!' 'it isn't us!' " he said. "It gets very tiresome. I don't want to be the president who has to apologize for the student body." Duke President Richard Brodhead also has weighed in, sending an e-mail message to students two weeks ago suggesting that they shape up.

Recent incidents of embarrassing behavior, which many students insist are isolated moments, include:

• A mock thesis in which recent alumna Karen Owen detailed her sexual dalliances with 13 Duke athletes. It was detailed, specific and graphic. Not
surprisingly, it proved quite popular when it surfaced on the Internet, prompting splashy coverage on NBC's "Today" show and other national news outlets.

• An e-mail message from a Duke fraternity invited female students to a Halloween party - in crass terms. It implored female students to attend dressed as "a slutty nurse, a slutty doctor, a slutty schoolgirl, or just a total slut." Like the sex partner dissertation, the e-mail was forwarded to a national website that promoted it prominently. The mainstream media took notice, as well. A New York Daily News headline blared: "More controversy at Duke: Sexist Halloween invitations spark furor, debate at elite university."

• The shutting down of Tailgate, a raucous, drunken outdoor student party that prefaced home football games. University officials did so after an underage sibling of a Duke student was discovered, passed out in a portable toilet.

Brodhead wrote in his message that the incidents created a "wildly distorted image of Duke." Still, he implored students to take more ownership of the university's image.

"To the extent that there are features of student culture that strike you as less than ideal, I urge you to face up to them, speak openly about them, and have the courage to visualize a change," he wrote.

'Lofty' message
The mass e-mail was out of character for Brodhead, who, students say, rarely communicates directly with them. Brodhead's message did a deft dance around the particulars of the sex list and the fraternity e-mail. He wrote that "Cartoonish images of gender relations have created offense and highlighted persistent discomforts."

Connor Southard, a Duke junior and columnist for the Duke Chronicle, the student newspaper, called Brodhead's message "extremely lofty and extremely vague."

"He was very careful not to mention specific examples of bad press," Southard said. "[But] I think it was a well-intentioned gesture. It has weight. It shows the university has acknowledged a trend."

Brodhead did not respond to requests for comment for this story.
Lefevre, the student government president, said he welcomed Brodhead's message but wished it weren't necessary. He agrees with Brodhead's assessment that these incidents feed a distorted perception of Duke students as morally suspect with feelings of entitlement.

"We know the way Duke has been portrayed is not what we are," said Lefevre, a senior from Philadelphia who recently helped organize a three-day "gender summit" on campus. "But for some reason, we are constantly singled out."

So what's that about? Is Duke the school people love to hate?

To many, Duke is known primarily for its men's basketball program, a juggernaut that sports fans seem to either adore or despise. That image spills over to the larger university - an elite, private institution tough to get into and costly to attend, said Robert Thompson, who directs the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University.

"It's a visible school," Thompson said. "When this stuff happens at Duke, it has a lot more voltage."

The lacrosse effect
But no Duke tempest would get as much attention as the recent incidents have if not for the lacrosse mess of 2006, argues Ben Edwards, a principal with Art & Science Group, a higher-education marketing firm with headquarters in Baltimore and Carrboro.

The allegation that three Duke lacrosse players raped a local exotic dancer prompted an explosion of media coverage and visceral reactions across the opinion spectrum. The players were eventually declared innocent, but not before being painted as rich and spoiled - a broad, overly general brushstroke that seemed to cover the entire student body.

"I don't think you can overlook the lacrosse scandal as the thing that makes subsequent things exacerbated," said Edwards, who worked in fundraising at Duke from 1983 to 1990.
Today's Duke undergraduates weren't on campus when the lacrosse case happened. Lefevre was a high school junior when the allegations surfaced. But it still affects his life.

"You can't say the name 'Duke' without someone mentioning the lacrosse thing," he said, adding that it makes him more aware of how outsiders view him. "Anytime we open ourselves up, we're going to get that comparison. We have to know we're under a microscope and because of our troubled past, we have to be aware of how we're perceived."

Perspective matters, said Craig Henriquez, an engineering professor and head of Duke's Academic Council. Henriquez knows well the hard-partying reputation of Duke students. But, he insists, they're also talented, promising and ambitious. "It's important not to broadly characterize all Duke students as boorish," he said. "I just don't see it. I see students working really hard. It's not Animal House."

eric.ferreri@newsobserver.com or 919-829-4563

The Brodhead letter

Duke President Richard Brodhead's Nov. 15 letter to students:

Dear Duke Students:

Twenty-five years ago, President Terry Sanford sent a famous letter. At that time, Duke students were receiving heavy television coverage for shouting obscenities at basketball games. Writing with warm appreciation of students and their enthusiasms, "Uncle Terry" asked if Dukies really wanted to allow themselves to appear so lacking in class. He challenged them to create a picture of Duke that did them better justice, by joining their intelligence to their exercise of high spirits.

It occurs to me that this might be time for a new letter from your uncle in the Allen Building. This fall we've had a series of incidents that, at least to a distant public, made the most boorish student conduct seem typical of Duke. Tailgate, a community celebration that regularly veered into excess and even danger, had to be canceled last week. Cartoonish images of gender relations have created offense and highlighted persistent discomforts. Like every other college in America, we have too much drinking on this campus. We've had our eyes opened to the serious costs of apparently harmless fun.

As you know better than anyone, these episodes can create a wildly distorted image of Duke. Duke undergraduates are, to my certain knowledge, as intelligent, as thoughtful, as creative, and as concerned for others as any student body in the country. Every day you amaze us with your talents. Watching your high promise unfold is the deep pleasure of this place.
But that doesn't mean things could not be made better here - and made better through your own acts. To the extent that there are features of student culture that strike you as less than ideal, I urge you to face up to them, speak openly about them, and have the courage to visualize a change. I myself and the members of my administration will cooperate with you fully. But we won't succeed in making Duke the best that it could be unless you make that your personal project, as you shape your own conduct and your collective life.

I applaud the fact that students have already initiated such discussion.

Duke's best tradition is that it's not stuck in traditions. You'll show yourselves true Duke students to the extent that you regard this university as yours to envision and yours to make. I challenge you to make it something great.

President Richard Brodhead
Two George Washington University medical school administrators to step down

By Lena H. Sun and Daniel de Vise
Tuesday, November 30, 2010; 11:38 PM

The two top administrators of the George Washington University medical school are being removed from their positions six months into a university review of the school's organizational structure, according to several medical school sources familiar with the changes.

Medical school dean James Scott announced two weeks ago that he was stepping down and returning to his full-time faculty position in January, according to a GWU statement. Medical school sources, who spoke on the condition of anonymity while discussing sensitive personnel matters, said top university officials pressured Scott to resign or risk jeopardizing his severance package.

The other leadership change involves John "Skip" Williams, senior vice provost and vice president for health affairs. Williams has told his senior staff that he plans to leave by the end of the year because the university no longer wants him in that position, according to three medical school sources. He has hired an attorney and is negotiating an agreement, the sources said. Neither Scott nor Williams returned telephone calls to their offices or e-mails sent to their university accounts.

Lorraine Voles, GWU's vice president for external relations, said that the situation with Williams, who also has tenure, remains unresolved. "We are currently discussing Dr. Williams' plans," she said in a written answer to questions.

During the transition, Provost Steve Lerman will announce any interim leadership appointments at the medical school, Voles said.

Williams was the second-highest-compensated university official after President Steven Knapp for the fiscal year ending June 2009, receiving a
total compensation of $912,839, according to the university's most recent tax returns. He is responsible for the administration and oversight of GWU's Medical Center, which includes the School of Medicine and Health Sciences, the School of Public Health and Health Services, and the School of Nursing.

Scott's total compensation was $567,435 for that same period, according to the documents.

The university began a one-year review in May at the request of the board of trustees. A group of outside experts was hired, and the initial phase, which concluded last month, focused on the relationship between the medical center and the medical school, officials said. No reports by the experts have been made public.

GWU's School of Medicine and Health Sciences was put on probation by its accrediting body in fall 2008 for a range of alleged deficiencies in its academic programs. It was, at the time, the only one on probation of the 129 U.S. institutions accredited by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education. Loss of accreditation would have effectively killed the program, one of the nation's oldest medical schools. The school was taken off probation in February.

University officials portrayed the problems as superficial. But a 2009 Washington Post investigation found more serious issues, including high levels of student debt and failure by school leaders to relate student clinical experiences to classroom learning.

The Post probe found a potentially serious conflict of interest in the school's leadership. Williams received money and stock options for serving on the board of directors of Universal Health Services, the company that owns the GWU hospital. Some critics said his stake in that company's profitability provided a potential incentive for Williams to focus on hospital finances rather than invest in medical education and research.

Williams resigned from the corporate board at the end of the 2009 academic year, although university officials said in a statement they found no evidence of "an actual conflict of interest." The issue was not a factor in the school's accreditation problems.
University spokeswoman Voles said Tuesday that Williams's former service on that board is not a factor in the review.

Founded in 1825, the medical school ranked 66th in the nation in research in the 2010 U.S. News & World Report rankings. The school serves about 700 students.

The university's hospital was purchased by the for-profit company in 1997; the facility was losing money and sapping the school's endowment. It is rare for a for-profit company to run a teaching hospital.

sunl@washpost.com devised@washpost.com
Staff researcher Lucy Shackelford contributed to this report.

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