

## HEALTH BRIEFS

### HELPING STEPCHILDREN DURING HOLIDAYS

Holiday planning can be stressful for stepfamilies. "The holidays can stir up old feelings that have not been resolved," said Dr. James Bray, a psychologist at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. "Many stepchildren are still upset over their parents' divorce and have not adjusted to their new family." Bray offers these suggestions to help resettle the nest in time for the holidays: Hold a family planning meeting. Assign duties among children, and be sure the older children are included. Create new family traditions. Rituals become shared experiences that can help solidify a family. Consider alternating holiday visits from year to year.

### DRINKING DOESN'T MIX WITH SHOPPING

Here's a combination to avoid this holiday season: drinking and shopping. Drinking alcohol can lead to impulse shopping, said Dr. Stuart C. Yudofsky, a psychiatrist at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. "If you have a few drinks at a party, go home, not to the mall," Yudofsky said. To avoid impulse buying and over-spending on holiday gifts, make a list, allow a certain amount of time for shopping and shop in advance, he said. You might also want to leave your credit cards at home. "Spending cash makes the purchase seem more 'real' than using plastic," Yudofsky said. But, whether you spend or use credit cards, lay off the alcohol before you go shopping.

### COLD CAN BE HARMFUL, EVEN DOWN SOUTH

If you live in the South, don't think you are safe from the dangerous effects of cold weather. Hypothermia, a condition resulting from dangerously low body temperatures, can occur even when it is only 50 degrees outside. Hypothermia has been reported even in tropical climates, said Dr. Stephen Spann of Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. Infants and the elderly are at highest risk. Babies' bodies lose heat faster because the surface is larger in proportion to their weight than in adults. In older people, the body gradually loses its cold sensitivity. Elderly people are less likely to detect temperature drops, and they recover more slowly from lowered body temperature. Tranquilizers and alcohol can complicate the situation. Early warning signs of hypothermia include a pale, puffy face; drowsiness; drop in blood pressure; and forgetfulness.

### CLOSING IN ON A HEART-DISEASE GENE

More than one gene may be responsible for familial dilated cardiomyopathy, a leading cause of heart transplantation and cardiac death. Researchers at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston have located a chromosomal site for one of the genes. In one family studied, a gene for FDCM was located on chromosome 10, but the actual gene has not yet been identified. "The site of the long arm of chromosome 10 known as 10q21-q23 contained several candidate genes, including muscle membrane proteins, energy-producing proteins and proteins involved in energy transport," said Dr. Jeffrey A. Towbin of Baylor. Familial dilated cardiomyopathy causes a reduction in the force of heart contractions. With FDCM, the walls of the heart dilate or balloon out under pressure, due to abnormal contractile activity in the heart muscle. The disorder is a major form of inherited heart disease and can be fatal.

### TESTICULAR SELF-EXAM IMPORTANT

Self-examination is a first step in a young man's guarding against testicular cancer. Cancer of the testicles can occur any time after the age of 15 but is most common between 20 and 35. It is four times more common among whites than blacks, said Dr. Seth P. Lerner, a urologist at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. The best time to do a monthly self-exam is after a warm shower when heat has caused the scrotum to relax. Use both hands to gently examine each testicle, placing the index and middle fingers beneath the testicle and the thumbs on top. Feel for any abnormal lumps, which are usually painless. Lerner cautions that men should not confuse a lump with the epididymis, a cord-like structure on the top and back of the testicle that stores and transports sperm. "If you feel an abnormal lump, contact your physician right away," Lerner said.

### ATAXIA GENE DISCOVERED BY SCIENTISTS

Scientists have identified the gene responsible for Friedreich ataxia, the most common form of inherited ataxia. In addition, they discovered the gene has an unusual mutation never before linked to a recessive gene. The findings are the collaborative work of scientists at Houston's Baylor College of Medicine and in France. Friedreich ataxia is autosomal recessive, which means the disease occurs only when a person inherits a copy of the mutated gene from both parents. Found once in every 50,000 people, the disease causes progressive loss of coordination and movement, including slurred speech and loss of tendon reflexes and sensation. The gene, X25 on chromosome 9, is active in the same tissues that degenerate in the patients; spinal cord, heart and pancreas.

## HEALTH

### Dillard's to help build Ronald McDonald House

#### Special to Sentinel-Voice

Dillard's Inc. is selling special holiday doublepack CD's and cassettes to benefit the Ronald McDonald House® of Greater Las Vegas.

The "Be Santa at Dillard's" promotion features top artists such as Donna Summer, Aaron Neville, Harry Belafonte, Kenny Rogers. A second CD and cassette features The Chipmunks. The CD's and cassettes are on sale now until December 24 at all 276 Dillard's locations nationwide. CD's will sell for \$9 and cassettes for \$7.

In the Las Vegas area, all profits

from sales will go to the Ronald McDonald House® of Greater Las Vegas which is under construction now near the corner of Sahara and Decatur. The House is scheduled to open in the first quarter of 1998.

"This extra special touch is a wonderful way to enjoy the season while extending a helping hand to others during the holiday season — all through the purchase of these CD's and cassettes," said Steve Dohm, store manager for Dillard's at the Boulevard Mall. "Together, Dillard's employees and customers continue to pledge our commitment to the Ronald

McDonald House® and the families it serves." In an effort to boost the sales of the CD's and cassettes, Dillard's has invited Ronald McDonald to attend their "Home for the Holidays" Event on Thursday, November 20.

The Ronald McDonald House® provides a "home-away-from-home" for the families of seriously ill children receiving treatment at nearby hospitals. Since the program's inception in 1974, more than two million people have been helped in more than 180 Ronald McDonald Houses® located in 14 countries.

### Pregnant women with asthma need to watch dosage

#### Special to Sentinel-Voice

HOUSTON — Pregnant women with asthma who don't use their inhalant medication could endanger their babies' lives.

Physicians at Baylor College of Medicine and Ben Taub General Hospital in Houston reviewed patient records of 25 pregnant women who had to be admitted to the hospital for asthma-related problems between 1990 and 1995. Five of the patients were hospitalized more than once.

Only 28 percent of the women had been using steroid inhalants to open up their lung airways.

"Limited use of inhaled steroid medication was probably the main reason these patients developed asthma-related breathing problems that warranted treatment in the hospital," said Dr. Ather Siddiqi, a Baylor resident specializing in pulmonary and critical care. He conducted the study with Dr. Nicola Hanania, assistant professor of medicine at Baylor and a member of the emergency room with complaints of shortness of breath, tightness in the chest and wheezing.

Asthma attacks occur when muscles in the bronchial walls contract, causing partial

obstruction of the bronchi, the tubes entering the lungs.

The obstructed airways can cause low levels of oxygen in the blood, which can be life-threatening to the fetus and mother, Siddiqi said. Four of the women in his study required treatment in the intensive-care unit, and two needed a respirator.

None of the mothers or babies Siddiqi studied died, but the babies were more likely to have a low birth weight (under six pounds).

"Because this was a retrospective study, we don't know whether the women's lack of inhalant usage was due

to a fear of taking drugs during pregnancy or to their primary care physician not prescribing the medication," he said.

"We suspect that asthma is underdiagnosed and undertreated in pregnant women," Siddiqi said. "A large prospective study is needed to confirm and learn more about the trend of inhalant use among pregnant asthmatics, particularly the use of anti-inflammatory drugs such as inhaled steroids."

Siddiqi presented the results of the study in a poster session at the annual meeting of the American Thoracic Society earlier this year.

### Patch helps control chronic low back pain

#### Special to Sentinel-Voice

HOUSTON — A medicated patch offers another treatment option for people with chronic low back pain, according to a new study.

"The majority of patients felt the patch was more effective and liked it better than the oral pain therapies they were taking," said Dr. Richard Simpson, associate professor of neurosurgery at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. "Patients testing the patch reported less pain and significantly less disability."

The patch, which lasts for 72 hours, delivers a continuous dose of fentanyl, a strong opioid therapy, through the skin and into the bloodstream. It is placed on a flat skin surface, such as the chest, back, side or upper arm.

"The standard oral opioid medications have to be taken every four to six hours, so there are generally peaks and valleys

in the level of medication within the system," said Simpson, who is on The Methodist Hospital neurosurgery staff. "The fentanyl patch is convenient and keeps the medication level constant."

The 50 study participants had suffered from chronic low back pain for a minimum of six months and had been taking prescription pain medications for at least six months. More than half of the participants had experienced low back pain for three to seven years, and all had at least one back surgery.

"These patients had tried everything from physical therapy and surgery to acupuncture and biofeedback," Simpson said. "Oral medication had been their only option to alleviate pain."

For the study, patients tested the fentanyl patch for one month. Minor side effects typical of all opioid

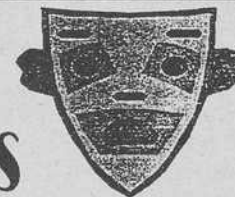
medications were reported, including mild nausea and constipation. However, the study reported these side effects were easily managed.

Upon completion of the study, close to half of the study participants chose to remain on the fentanyl patch. The results are published in the

October issue of the *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*.

"This treatment already has proven to be effective for chronic pain related to cancer, and now it can provide an option for chronic low back pain patients taking oral medications," Simpson said.

## Zaliwa Creations



**SPECIALIZING IN UNIQUE ETHNIC/AFRICAN GIFTS FOR THE HOLIDAYS**  
Framed Black Art, Prints, Wood Carvings, Books, Black Bibles, Figurines, Porcelain Dolls, Jewelry, Clocks, Magnets, Cards, Calendars, Hats, Bags, Clothing Accessories, Oils, Incense, Fragrance Spray, and Much, Much more.

**NEW PRODUCTS ALL THE TIME!**  
Come and check out our Black Christmas & Kwanza Cards

**10% Off with this ad**  
OFFER EXPIRES DECEMBER 1, 1997

**1240 W. Owens, Ste. #3**  
(1 block east Martin Luther King Blvd.)

Owner Colleen James **646-1811** Owner Joyce McNeal

**Davey Deals**  
AUTOS • BIKES • BOATS  
1717 FREMONT at BRUCE SHELDON WELCH  
E-Z FINANCING & LOW PAYMENTS  
HOME OF THE \$300 DOWN  
WE SELL 'EM FAST  
CUZ WE SELL 'EM CHEAP **474-7777**