

## HEALTH BRIEFS

### MAGNET THERAPY REDUCES PAIN IN POST-POLIO PATIENTS

A small magnet strapped to post-polio patients' most sensitive sore spots reduced pain acutely in a study of 50 people. "The majority of patients in the double-blind study who received the treatment with a magnet reported a significant decrease in pain," said Dr. Carlos Valbona, a Baylor professor of family and community medicine and director of the post-polio clinic at The Institute for Rehabilitation and Research. Researchers pressed on the body points where patients felt the severest pain and they ranked the pain from one to 10, with 10 being the worst. Patients were then given an active or inactive magnet to strap to the problem area. Those who received the active magnet gave an average score of 4.4 after treatment. The placebo group had an average score of 8.4 afterward. "We have no explanation for the quick pain relief," Valbona said. "It's possible that the magnetic fields affect the pain receptors in joints or muscles or lower the sensation of pain in the brain."

### WOMEN'S RATE OF HEART DISEASE UNDERESTIMATED

Almost half of the nearly 500,000 heart attack victims each year are women. "More women in the United States die from heart disease than any other single cause," said Dr. Michael DeBakey, chancellor emeritus at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston and director of The DeBakey Heart Center at Baylor and The Methodist Hospital. Because physicians and the public have often underestimated the incidence of heart disease in women, DeBakey has devoted an entire chapter to this problem in "The New Living Heart." His new book is an extensively revised, second edition of the 1977 best seller "The Living Heart." "Knowledge is a key factor in preventing and coping with such a deadly disease not just for men, but also for women," DeBakey said. Cardiovascular disease remains the number one killer in the United States, causing the deaths of one million people each year.

### EXERCISE, BODY POSITION CAN HELP PREVENT BACK PAIN

Exercise and body positioning are the keys to preventing back pain. "Strained back muscles can result from improperly lifting a heavy object or sitting in an awkward position for long periods of time," said Dr. Martin Grabis, chairman of the department of physical medicine and rehabilitation at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. Grabis suggests doing sit-ups, leg lifts, hip lifts and a sit-and-reach exercise. This involves sitting with the legs spread apart, extending the hands toward the feet as far as possible and slowly returning to an upright position. The exercise, done three to four times a week, will target the muscles that support the back and help prevent back injuries.

### SCIENTISTS: NICOTINE'S ACTIONS IN BRAIN LINKED TO REWARD PATHS

Nicotine's action in the brain explains why smokers report the first cigarette of the day is the most pleasurable. Neuroscientists at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston studied how the brain reacts to nicotine. "We focused on a group of neurons, or nerve cells, in the midbrain that release a compound called dopamine," said Dr. John Dani, a Baylor associate professor of neuroscience. "Those neurons are known to be important in other types of addiction." Dopamine release is related to aspects of reward, so it shapes behaviors by giving a reward or feeling of pleasure in response to external stimuli. Doctors found when the nicotine first arrives, the neurons burst with activity. The first cigarette of the day gives smokers their first exposure to nicotine in eight to 10 hours, so the neurons experience an extreme burst of activity.

### PARENTS: STUDY LABEL BEFORE BUYING "FAT-FREE" FOR CHILDREN

Parents need to read food labels carefully before buying fat-free foods for growing children. "In some cases, even when dietary fat has been reduced, the serving size may have a considerable amount of calories," said Dr. Janice Stuff of the USDA/ARS Children's Nutrition Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. "Children may tend to eat more servings, which may cause them to gain weight." Fat-free may not be the best answer for growing children. They need fat in their diets, especially during growth spurts. The energy fat provides helps them maintain normal body functions and supports the increased growth in muscle, skin and bone. In fact, 30 percent of a child's caloric intake should come from fat. Fat also helps the body absorb fat-soluble vitamins like A, D and E. Some of the fat-free offerings may not be as balanced in these vitamins. Stuff says the daily required amount of fat will help kids grow up to be strong, healthy adults. The key is moderation.

## HEALTH

# FDA approves new test for prostate cancer

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*  
HOUSTON — A new blood test that more accurately detects prostate cancer has been approved by the Food and Drug Administration.

Known as the "Free PSA" test, this screening device can help determine whether men actually have prostate cancer or just a benign prostate condition.

Baylor College of Medicine in Houston was one of seven medical centers across the nation that conducted clinical trials of the test, which received FDA approval recently.

"The Free PSA test should reduce the number of

unnecessary prostate biopsies and ease the anxiety of many men at risk for prostate cancer," said Dr. Kevin Slawin, who directed the clinical trials at the Department of Urology's Baylor Prostate Center.

High levels of prostate specific antigen (PSA), a protein produced by the prostate, can indicate prostate cancer. But they also can result for non-cancerous conditions.

A PSA level of zero to four is considered little or no risk of cancer. A level greater than 10 is associated with high risk.

But men whose total PSA test measures between four and 10 are in a "gray diagnostic

zone," said Slawin, director of the Baylor Prostate Center. "This moderately high level might or might not be due to cancer."

Because nearly all prostate cancers that are detected before the cancer has spread outside the prostate can be cured, many patients with a moderately elevated PSA have undergone biopsies in an effort to detect cancers at the earliest stage possible.

The Free PSA test was designed as a follow-up test to the total PSA test.

"It is expected to spare many men an uncomfortable and costly biopsy when the test

results indicate the moderately high PSA level is due to benign prostatic hyperplasia, a common swelling of the prostate in older men, rather than cancer," Slawin said.

Clinical trials of the Free PSA test detected 95 percent of prostate cancers. The cancers not identified by the test were more likely to be small and not life-threatening.

The American Cancer Society estimates that 184,500 American men will be diagnosed with prostate cancer this year, and more than 39,000 will be killed.

The prostate is a walnut-  
(See Prostate, Page 16)

## Study: Race may affect glaucoma treatment

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*  
WASHINGTON — White patients with advanced glaucoma may start getting different treatment advice from their doctors in light of a federal study that found the current method is more effective for black people than for whites.

Treatment for advanced glaucoma, when the disorder has progressed so far that eye drops are no longer effective, begins with laser therapy and can then move to a surgical procedure called trabeculectomy. This is the process that the National Institutes of Health study determined works best for blacks.

But whites did better over the long term if they had the trabeculectomy first, said the study, released Sunday.

Black patients should continue the laser therapy-first treatment process, said Dr. Douglas E. Gaasterland, the study leader. But "white patients with advanced glaucoma, who have no life-threatening health problems, should have a treatment program that starts with trabeculectomy," he said.

Dr. Richard Mills of the University of Washington School of Medicine said the finding "has to be paid attention to. I believe it may cause (doctors) to at least discuss with their white patients a different treatment sequence," said Mills, a former president of the American Academy of Ophthalmology.

Dr. Andrew Iwach, a San Francisco ophthalmologist, cautioned that each case needs to be looked at individually.

"There is still a need for appropriate clinical judgment based on the particular patient," he said. But, "the issue of race does play a role. ... We know that, for unclear reasons, in black patients (trabeculectomy) is more difficult to maintain."

Glaucoma, a leading cause of irreversible vision loss, is a progressive disorder. Treatment to preserve sight begins with eye drops, followed by surgery. An estimated 3 million Americans have the ailment, and 120,000 are blind as a result.

The study, funded by NIH's National Eye Institute, followed patients for seven years. The researchers found a decrease in vision in the eyes of 28 percent of black patients

who had laser surgery first, compared with 37 percent who began with trabeculectomy.

For whites, vision declined in 31 percent who started with trabeculectomy and 35 percent who began with laser surgery.

Researchers were surprised at the differing racial responses to treatment, they said in the July issue of *Ophthalmology*, the journal of the American Academy of Ophthalmology.

Dr. Carl Kupfer, director of the National Eye Institute, said:

"This is the first evidence that members of two racial groups benefit from different treatments for glaucoma. Doctors now have better information to recommend treatment programs depending on the patient's race."

"I'm not sure I can think, offhand, of any other condition in which the treatment is different depending on the ethnic background or the race" of the patient, Kupfer said.

(See Glaucoma, Page 15)

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