

Willerson Gives State Legislators Information About Stem Cell Research

University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston President James T. Willerson, M.D., and four other experts last month provided members and staff of the 79th Texas Legislature information on various aspects of stem cell research.

Urging lawmakers to find state dollars for stem cell research, Willerson said, "To fail to take advantage, we'll just watch the rest of the world do it — and we don't have to take the back seat here in Texas when we're in a position to develop this research better than anyone."

He explained the potential therapeutic uses for stem cells, particularly those from non-

controversial sources such as umbilical cord blood and adult bone marrow. A pioneering clinical study with desperately ill heart patients in Brazil, completed by Willerson and TMC colleagues, showed dramatic results in improving blood flow and heart function. The ability of adult stem cell therapy to improve the quality of life has now been demonstrated by more than 100 heart patients worldwide.

Willerson and Emerson Perin, M.D., Ph.D., director of New Interventional Cardiovascular Technology at the Texas Heart Institute, now are leading one of the first FDA-approved clinical trials for stem cell therapy. They are treating patients with severe

heart failure using the patient's own bone-marrow derived stem cells.

"If I sound excited by this, I am!" Willerson said. "I'm not sending anybody to a foreign country for heart treatment — we need to see how much we can do right here in Texas."

Willerson was one of five panelists on the topic, "What is Stem Cell Research?" during a Texas Legislative Educational Stem Cell Research Forum, which was open to the public and webcast on the Texas Senate Web site. The half-day program was organized by State Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo, and State Rep. Rick Hardcastle, R-Vernon.

"Our intention today is to educate," said

Hardcastle (who has multiple sclerosis). "We have to take away the mystery and the hype from this topic if the Legislature is to make a sound policy decision with the purpose of Texas staying in the forefront of scientific discoveries."

In his State of the State address, Gov. Rick Perry called for a ban on human cloning in Texas. He also has said he won't support embryonic stem cell research.

Democrats in New York recently proposed a \$1 billion initiative to promote stem cell research there. California voters have approved a huge \$3 billion fund for embryonic stem cell research. ★

The Road to Wellness Began for Many at the Health & Wellness Fair

By Erika E. Durham, Public Affairs

Fran Howard has a history of hypertension in her family, but she wants to make sure it isn't part of her future.

Howard, a support specialist in Surgery-Organ Transplantation at the UT Medical School at Houston, joined more than 500 other health-conscious faculty, staff and students Jan. 19 for the 2005 Health and Wellness Fair at the Medical School Fitness Center.

"I really came to see everything the health fair had to offer," Howard said. "But

I specifically wanted to check my blood pressure. Hypertension runs in my family."

Attendants also were able to undergo dental, skin cancer, glucose and heel-bone density screenings. Body mass index testing was among one of the more popular services available.

Andrena Alexander, an employee with UT Physicians, said she specifically came for the vision testing. "Lately I haven't been able to see clearly and I thought this was the perfect opportunity to get my eyes

checked," she said.

Kana Ross and Maria Hadjifrangiskou, fourth-year students at the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, shared Alexander's perception of the fair as a "perfect opportunity." Professional, free and convenient health care advice is just too good to pass up, they said.

The UT WorkLife program added some splash to the event with punch cards participants could present at various booths. Once the punch card had been completed,

it could be submitted in a drawing for prizes from a variety of vendors.

This first Workplace of Choice health fair was sponsored by the WorkLife Program, the UT Recreation Center managed by Auxiliary Enterprises, Environmental Health and Safety, the School of Nursing UT Health Services, UT Physicians, the Office of Public Affairs, Waterside Court in the John P. McGovern Texas Medical Center Commons, and Mocha Delites (UT Catering). ★



Rick Mantler, manager of Business Development for the UT Employee Assistance Program, hands out one of the health fair's most popular giveaways — Workplace of Choice mouse pads.



Kirk Hamilton, with Memorial Hermann Healthcare System, helps Fran Howard, a support specialist in Surgery-Organ Transplantation at the UT Medical School at Houston, with a body mass index test during the health fair. Photos by Erika E. Durham

Calling All Volunteers!

Across the health science center campus and out in the community, several hundred faculty, staff, students and friends go beyond the call of duty to further our mission of service, education and discovery.

They are UT Volunteers, and the university wants them to stand up and be recognized.

The Office of Public Affairs has launched the health science center's UT Volunteers initiative as a means of promoting volunteerism and recognizing those who contribute in many ways beyond their official job duties or without actual employment.

"Volunteers provide invaluable support to the institution, its mission and goals," said Carol Rone, a volunteer coordinator who oversees the work of 40 volunteers at the UT Harris County Psychiatric Center.

For years generous volunteers have come to campus to assist with patient care activities or to help out in research labs, among other duties, but the health science center as a whole has not recognized their contributions, according to Jane Brust, assistant vice president for public affairs.

"We also have faculty, staff and students who go out into the community giving talks, judging school science fairs, and offering health

screenings," Brust said. "There are many ways in which individuals contribute to the work of the health science center as volunteers, and we hope to identify new opportunities to involve even more interested people in the life of the university."

For example, Brust said, the new program will reach out to faculty spouses and the spouses of students and residents who may be looking for ways to become involved.

In addition to the goal of recognizing volunteer contributions, the UT Volunteers program seeks to assist those who coordinate the activi-

ties of volunteers.

"The new UT Volunteers Web site — and promotion of that site — should help with the recruitment of new volunteers where needed,

while recognition efforts should help to retain and nurture each volunteer's interest in the health science center,"

Brust said. The first event to honor health science center volunteers will take place in April.

The UT Volunteers program also involves the required screening and processing of volunteer applications — which continues to be handled by staff in Human Resources — and the tracking of volunteers and volunteer hours,

UT Volunteers

To Help

If you, your department or program works with volunteers in any way, please visit <http://www.uthouston.edu/volunteer/vinformation.asp> to share some brief information about their contributions so that they may be recognized among our UT Volunteers.

For information on how to create a volunteer opportunity for your program or department, e-mail Elise.PJenkins@uth.tmc.edu in Public Affairs.

For more information about opportunities for UT Volunteers, visit <http://www.uthouston.edu/volunteer/index.html>.

so that the university can report those numbers accurately when requested by legislators and other officials. An hour-long "welcome" program will be offered to new volunteers to familiarize them with the mission and goals of the health science center and its schools and units.

In addition, volunteer coordinators and contacts from around campus will be invited to meet periodically to share their ideas for working effectively with volunteers. Among the first coordinators to gather in January were those who work with volunteers associated with the Harris County Psychiatric Center, the School of Nursing Center on Aging, the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, the Office of Public Affairs, the Office of Community and Educational Outreach, the Dental Branch, the Medical School, and the School of Health Information Sciences.

The newest volunteer opportunity will be visible later this spring when UT Volunteers specializing in tender loving care appear in the UT Health Science Center Professional Building to assist patients in various caring ways. Coordinator Lynn Cutrer is spearheading the effort, which will place the first volunteers in the UT Physicians clinics for Internal Medicine and Pediatrics. ★