Scanner puts light on brain

New MU center aids neurology.

By Janese Heavin

Saturday, October 31, 2009

New imaging equipment at the University of Missouri will allow researchers to get a better understanding of how the brain works to detect and treat a variety of neurological diseases.

The Brain Imaging Center is the first of its kind in Mid-Missouri, said Nelson Cowan, curator's professor of psychological sciences at MU and temporary director of the center.

The center includes a state-of-the-art magnetic resource imaging scanner, or MRI, and accessories designed for a variety of experiments.

"It's a very well-designed imaging machine," Cowan said.

As with a traditional MRI machine, a patient is required to lie still while brain waves are being traced. However, the Brain Image Center allows patients to perform simple physical tasks such as pushing a button or speaking when asked. The center also includes a second scanner that allows patients and scientists to inexpensively practice using the machine before producing actual images.

Already, researchers from some 15 different departments are interested in using the Brain Imaging Center, Cowan said. That includes plans to study brain activity in those who have autism, depression, schizophrenia and Alzheimer's disease.

Additionally, nutrition researchers are interested in partnering with the center to purchase extra equipment to produce body images. That would allow, for instance, scientists to study alcoholism by watching food metabolize in the liver.

"We can use this campuswide and statewide," Cowan said. "It will be helpful in a variety of ways and eventually provide treatments and reduce the costs of diseases in Missouri."

The center cost $3.8 million and was funded by both the university and grant funding. It will cost $130,000 a year to maintain. The center was partly modeled after a similar facility at Washington University in St. Louis.

The Brain Imaging Center is expected to generate revenues by securing grant funding and encouraging collaboration with off-campus partners.
"This center will set MU apart from other universities that have restricted access to hospital equipment such as MRIs and will enhance the university’s faculty recruitment, grant funding and breakthrough research," Shawn Christ, assistant professor of psychological sciences, said in a prepared statement.

MU Chancellor Brady Deaton said the facility gives researchers access to “the best equipment to help them uncover the secrets of diseases that can affect millions of people. This is vital in our mission to improve the quality of life for Missourians and people throughout the country.”

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New program aids bilingual patients

By Melissa Evans Staff Writer
Posted: 11/01/2009 06:02:18 AM PST
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Being diagnosed with cancer is bad enough. When you don't understand the health system, it can be even worse.

Silvano Gonzalez was in that predicament. When he was 14 he was diagnosed with a brain tumor. His parents don't speak English, and he was forced to figure things out largely on his own.

"I know what that's like," he said. "It's a lot of stress on top of what you're already going through."

Gonzalez, now recovered, just landed his dream job: He is California's first "patient navigator," a position created to help people - particularly those who don't speak English - figure out everything from getting rides to the hospital to scheduling necessary appointments.

The program, funded by a private grant and run by the American Cancer Society, is being launched at County Harbor-UCLA Medical Center near Torrance today.

The program is intended to provide support for patients along the route to hopeful recovery, including explaining various treatments and helping them through the psychological and social aspects of treatment, said Dr. Eva Lean, president of the American Cancer Society's California Division.

Funded by a $10 million grant from drug maker AstraZeneca, the program is free and confidential. It is intended to reach the underserved population in particular, Lean said.

The American Cancer Society has navigators now in place at 23 hospitals throughout the country, and the program at Harbor-UCLA will be California's first. The grant will fund 50 new navigators over a five-year period in communities throughout the country, officials said.

The program will provide patients a "critical link" to local resources, both in the hospital and in the community, said Miguel Ortiz-Marroquin, chief executive of Harbor-UCLA. The Torrance-area facility, one of three county-run hospitals, serves mostly those without insurance and few medical resources.
The hospital has interpreters on hand and some members of the medical staff are bilingual, but patients often don't feel comfortable asking questions, Gonzalez said.

"Sometimes it's a matter of not knowing what questions to ask," he said. "It can be really intimidating."

In the last month, Gonzalez has already connected with about 60 patients. He said he has found that their needs are often overlooked, such as missing appointments because they can't afford gas.

"A lot of people take these things for granted," he said.

More than 90 million Americans suffer from "low health literacy," a term used by the Institute of Medicine to describe the mismatch between patients' abilities to understand health care information and providers' abilities to communicate with them.

Two recent studies from the University of Missouri found that non-English speaking patients fare the worst in these situations. Researchers found that those with limited English proficiency perceived that their physician did not listen to them, did not treat them with respect and did not involve them in treatment.

Cultural differences often compound these problems, the study found.

Lean, of the cancer society, said getting accurate information is particularly important when patients are facing a deadly disease.

"People don't have to go through it alone," she said.

Most of the patients at Harbor-UCLA are referred by the hospital's social services department. Gonzalez said so far, the service has been well-received.

"It's really about knowing what services are out there for people," he said. "The more we can grow the safety net for these people, the better off they'll be."

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Lawmakers forecast effect of budget cuts

Health facilities, MU register hits.

By Terry Ganev

Saturday, October 31, 2009

The budget cuts Gov. Jay Nixon announced earlier this week will fall hard on Columbia, said two state lawmakers who represent the area.

State Sen. Kurt Schaefer, R-Columbia, and Rep. Chris Kelly, D-Columbia, said they don’t question the need to balance state spending with revenues. But they said there is no question the cuts will have a negative impact on education and health care.

Schaefer is a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, and Kelly sits on the House Budget Committee. Nixon on Wednesday announced $204 million in cuts, bringing to $634 million the amount sliced from the state budget for the current fiscal year.

While Nixon protected core teaching systems of the University of Missouri, cuts of 25 percent were applied to the budgets of University Hospital, the Institute of Mental Health, the Missouri Kidney Program and MU’s telemedicine program.

Kelly said some of the programs teach doctors how to connect with patients over the Internet and fund critical research in the area of renal failure. Noting the high cost of kidney dialysis, Kelly said, “If you find people who are going to get renal disease and treat it early, the savings are astronomical.”

One of the largest areas where the state hopes to save money — $32 million — is in reducing rates paid to vendors for treatment of people on Medicaid, the health care program for the poor and disabled. If the rate reductions are applied to direct medical care services, it could have an affect on University Hospital because it serves such a large population of people on Medicaid from throughout Mid-Missouri.

“Any cut in rates for the provision of medical services is a direct income transfer out of Columbia,” Kelly said. “That could mean anywhere from $5 million to $12 million in lost income. When people have serious medical problems in Chillicothe or Cabool, they come here.”

Schaefer said, “We don’t know yet that that will be the case, but that’s a concern on everybody’s mind.”
Schaefer said he has heard from people who will lose their jobs and schooling because of a $2.3 million cut in a “virtual education” program offered by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The program will be eliminated after this semester.

“I’ve heard from parents of students and teachers who will lose their jobs,” Schaefer said.

Roger Mitchell, chairman of the Life Sciences Research Board, said the agency staff had received 180 letters of intent from scientists seeking financial grants for research in such areas as plant and animal agriculture, water quality and medical devices. No grants will be funded as a result of a $13 million budget cut.

“We fully understand the challenges with the state’s revenue and the need to make these cuts,” said Mitchell, the former dean of the MU College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources. “We are waiting to see if there is any possibility that some of the funds will be released.”

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Federal government takeover of college loan pool in works
By MARA ROSE WILLIAMS

College students are facing a sea change in borrowing to pay for their degrees — unfortunately, many would still be drowning in debt.

The change, perhaps as soon as July, would end the Federal Family Education Loan program that has dominated the federal student loan pool for more than 40 years.

Banks and other private sources would be cut out of the process by the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act, passed in September by the U.S. House. The measure still must be considered by the Senate.

Colleges that once kept a long list of lenders are converting to the Direct Loan Program, in which student loans come directly from the government.

The trend was accelerated by many private lenders dropping out of the business when the economy tanked. That led Congress to pass temporary legislation — expiring in June — to assure that students and families still would be able to get loans for school.

In the last two years, students already were relying more on federal loans. The volume of loans from private sources fell by 52 percent in the 2008-2009 school year, according to a recent report by the College Board, a nonprofit organization that watches trends in higher education.

"Moving to direct lending will ... eliminate the uncertainty families have experienced due to the turmoil of the financial markets," said Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

That's all well and good, said Tony George, director of financial aid at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, which is preparing to switch to the Direct Loan Program by December. But the cost of borrowing would remain the same as under the old system.

"Will students get any better interest rates with direct lending? No."

The balance of outstanding federal loans assumed by students or their parents continues to grow. By 2007-08, two-thirds of four-year undergraduate students had some debt along with their degrees. The average cumulative debt incurred was $27,803, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

During the same time, 56 percent of graduate education students owed, with the average cumulative debt $40,297. The range was $119,400 for those with medical degrees to $29,975 for those with a master of arts degree.

"Students are big fans of direct lending," said Amanda Shelton, a member of the Missouri Students Association, which represents the undergraduates at the University of Missouri in Columbia. "But direct lending does not solve the student loan debt problems.

"We would like a lot more grant money, more work study, financial literacy training," Shelton said. "I need student loans, but I have not taken out any because I remain cognizant of the negative reality of student loans — they bind you to find an excellent job out of college, and in this economy that is next to impossible."

For the last 10 years, college costs on average rose faster than inflation. Published tuition and fees at public four-year colleges and universities rose at an average annual rate of 4.9 percent beyond general inflation from 1999-2000 to 2009-10, more rapidly than in either of the previous two decades, according to the College Board.

In this school year — 2009-2010 — four-year public colleges in the U.S. raised the average tuition cost by 6.5 percent to $7,020. At private colleges, tuition went up by an average of 4.4 percent to a cost of $26,273 — at a time the consumer price index had gone down.
Letting the government federally guarantee student loans was advocated by President Barack Obama.

The University of Kansas has done it that way for more than a decade. The University of Missouri-Kansas City converted to direct lending this year.

Now some 3,000 other colleges across the U.S. are gearing up to make the switch, including the Metropolitan Community College-Kansas City and Fort Hays State in Kansas.

"I always felt that bankers are professional lenders and why should we get into that game. But it looks like the government is going to force it on us," said Ed Hammond, Fort Hays State president.

Proponents estimate saving more than $80 billion over 10 years by eliminating the federal subsidies paid to private lenders. They say the money should go into college funding and more grants to students — raising the maximum Pell Grant to $5,500 in 2010-2011.

"President Obama has set a goal for America to once again have the highest proportion of college graduates by the end of the next decade," Duncan said.

"To get there, we need to increase college access and do a much better job at helping students stay the course and complete their college education."

The proposed legislation would provide a variety of flexible repayment options. And more grant money is promising, too.

Neotashia Jackson, 32, a single parent and education major at UMKC, works 15 hours a week in the university's financial aid office. Jackson borrowed all the money going for education, as well as child care for her 2-year-old daughter, rent and food.

At $8,000 a semester, she is going to graduate $64,000 in debt and get a job teaching, a field in which the average starting annual salary is $32,500.

"Yes, I'm worried. But the way I see it, I was a licensed cosmetologist and to better myself I had to increase my skill," she said. "I woke up one day and said, 'Oh my gosh, how am I going to pay for this'?"

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Jackson’s loan payments on a 10-year program would be $748 a month. But she would need an annual salary of $112,203. On a 25-year program, payments would be $451 a month; she would need to make $67,672 a year.

"I just hope that when I graduate the government will help me pay back some of this debt," Jackson said.

Jackson is just the kind of student Cindy Butler, director of financial aid at MCC-Kansas City, worries about under direct lending.

Financial aid offices such as Butler's this summer were overwhelmed by the crush of federal aid requests from financially strapped students. Because staff was cut under recessionary pressures, she said, "We are not staffed to give students financial counseling and to do default management after they graduate; the private lenders did that."

Then there is this worry, said Jan Brandow, financial aid director at UMKC: "About 70 percent of the schools are not on direct lending." If they wait until the last minute to switch and flood the government's electronic loan communication system, it could collapse under the volume.

Last week Duncan sent a letter to thousands of colleges and universities urging them get ready to use the Direct Loan Program by summer.

But U.S. Sen. Claire McCaskill, a Missouri Democrat, said she thought schools would have plenty of time to change to the Direct Loan Program.

"I would be shocked if something like this were to become effective in the same year that it is passed," McCaskill said. "It would be more like 2011. If I had to guess or die, the Senate is not likely to even pick up the student aid bill until after it's done with health care reform."

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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. — Budget cuts could force a Missouri school to close midway through the academic year, leaving students with half-earned credits scrambling to complete their education.

Some students, just a few credits shy of graduation, could wind up as high school dropouts. Others, struggling with cancer, could miss their only chance to earn a degree.

The school in question is the Missouri Virtual Instruction Program, which offers Internet-based courses for everyone from kindergartners to high school seniors. The online public school began just three years ago and already has served a couple thousand students.

About half the children are taking courses to supplement their education in traditional public or private school classrooms. For the other half, the online school is their only school.

Gov. Jay Nixon announced last week that he was halting state funding for the online school’s second semester as part of $204 million in budget cuts caused by declining state revenues.

The Democratic governor said students still could continue their courses if parents or local school districts paid the cost. But that’s a big “if,” considering many schools and families already are financially strapped because of the recent recession.

“What the governor has done is basically kicked those kids out of their school and removed the opportunity for them to take those classes,” said Brian Baker, a Cass County commissioner who wrote the virtual schools law as a Republican
Missouri was in the middle of the pack nationally when lawmakers voted to create the publicly funded online school. Now 35 states have state-led virtual schools or online programs, according to the International Association for K-12 Online Learning.

In Missouri, demand for the online courses has exceeded the supply of money from the state.

The online school grew from a $5.2 million program with more than 2,000 students in the 2007-2008 academic year to a $5.8 million program with about 2,500 students in its second year, according to the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Because of budget troubles, lawmakers already had scaled back the virtual school this year to a $4.8 million program serving 1,600 kids who enrolled on a first-come, first-serve basis.

About 2,000 were turned away when the free slots filled up. A small percentage of them enrolled anyway after their parents or local school districts paid $325 per course, said Monica Beglau, executive director of the eMINTS National Center, a nonprofit business unit of the University of Missouri that runs the online school.

A majority of Missouri's online students are in high school, and many need just a couple course credits to graduate, Beglau said.

Because of the budget cuts, "we have kids right now who are saying if I can't get the second semester, I'm going to just drop out and quit now," Beglau said.

Other students are taking online courses at home because they are undergoing chemotherapy treatment for cancer, and crowded classrooms would pose a hazard for their weakened immune systems, Beglau said. Now their parents will have to make a choice — send their children to school and risk their health, or keep their children at home and deny their dreams of earning diplomas, she said.
"If I'm a parent with a sick kid, do you think I have a lot of expendable cash to pay tuition?" Beglau rhetorically asked, her voice cracking with emotion.

It may be equally unrealistic to expect local school districts to pay the bill for every student in their geographic areas who wants to take an online course.

"Districts are obviously in very difficult financial times, and it may get worse before it gets better," said Brent Ghan, a spokesman for the Missouri School Boards' Association. "It would be a challenge for most districts to take on additional expenditures at this time, though some might be willing to do it."

If neither parents nor school districts can afford it, Missouri's online school may have to shut down in January, Beglau said. If so, the school's 48 teachers and seven administrative and technical staff members could lose their jobs.

Nixon spokesman Scott Holste said the governor supports the online school but had to make tough choices to balance the state budget. The virtual school is funded with revenues from the Missouri Lottery, which now are projected to fall about $40 million short of the $290 million anticipated when the budget passed, he said.

"The realities of the budget are what's driving this," Holste said.
Bus driver not at fault for Rocheport winery incident

By Michelle Hagopian
October 30, 2009 | 6:04 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — A bus driver who ran over an MU student in September at Les Bourgeois Vineyards in Rocheport is not at fault in the situation, according to the Missouri State Highway Patrol.

After the winery closed for the night on Sept. 18, students were boarding the bus in the parking lot. As the driver put the vehicle in reverse, it ran over Brian Lindsey, a 22-year-old student.

Rachel Mills, the winery's marketing director, said Les Bourgeois has suspended all large after-hours events through the end of this year. Miller said the winery was determining what constituted a large group on a case-by-case basis.
History group tightens belt

Sketch is floated as hours are cut.

By Janese Heavin

Sunday, November 1, 2009

The State Historical Society of Missouri yesterday unveiled architectural renderings of a proposed five-story building expected to someday showcase its collections of original artwork and rare manuscripts.

But before the facility can become reality, the historical society will have to get over some financial humps. And to do that, the society is whittling its hours of operation and employee salaries, Executive Director Gary Kremer told members during the society’s annual meeting yesterday.

The historical society, located in Ellis Library on the University of Missouri campus, will now be closed on Fridays and Saturdays, limiting the hours of operation to 8 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays. To further tighten its belt, the society’s roughly 25 employees have volunteered to each take a 20 percent pay cut.

“It’s a serious commitment on the part of the staff,” Kremer said, noting the pay cuts along with some positions that were eliminated earlier this year were an alternative to layoffs.

The changes come after Gov. Jay Nixon last week announced a $364,000 cut to the historical society budget, part of a $204 million reduction in the state’s budget.

The society earlier this year saw a 10 percent cut in funding from the state.

To also offset those losses, the society is turning to private donors for help. Kremer specifically pointed to funding for the Missouri Historical Review, a 103-year-old quarterly publication that profiles various aspect of the state’s history.

“The Review won’t be eliminated. We’ll just have to find private funds to pay for it,” he said. “Through the Depression and two world wars, we’ve never missed an issue, and we don’t intend to now.”

But he acknowledged soliciting private donations for operational costs will take a toll on fundraising efforts for the proposed new building.
The society is in the process of forming a committee to determine the next step in the building project, said Doug Crews, president of the board of trustees. He said the roughly 135,000-square-foot building is expected to cost $35 million. There is no specific capital campaign or a timeline for construction.

The proposed building would sit on the MU campus off Elm Street between Sixth and Seventh streets. Colorado-based architectural firm ShearsAdkins designed the structure, which would have separate floors for an art gallery, conference room and classrooms, genealogy and reference materials, the Western Historical Manuscript Collection and administrative offices. A fifth-floor, walk-out rooftop terrace would provide a meeting spot with a view of Peace Park and campus. Parking would be available underground and in back of the building.

Architect Chris Shears "has come up with a very attractive building that meets the programming element and fits the site," said Herb Duncan, a Maine-based consultant and former Kansas City architect who is working with the society. Pointing to the proposed brick-and-stone façade, he said the structure also would serve as a transitional building between architecture on campus and downtown Columbia.

Having more room and friendlier parking "will be a huge change for the society," Duncan said. "This will be a huge asset for the citizens of Columbia, the city and the university."

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Open Column

City billing enables big salaries at MU

Saturday, October 31, 2009

Editor, the Tribune: It is unbelievable that the city's billing procedure missed charging the University of Missouri $500,000. But it is more unbelievable that they will stretch the payments out for 10 years, particularly when MU has enough to grant Athletic Director Mike Alden, football Coach Gary Pinkel and basketball Coach Mike Anderson huge raises.

And on top of this, UM President Gary Forsee's request for the employees to scrimp, cut hours, etc. gives the appearance of also helping the big three maintain their salaries. With this action, the city also appears to be helping the big three maintain their huge salaries.

What is wrong with this picture?

Paul Johnson

118 Dene
FATHER OF INVENTION

By T.J. Greanev

As Henry Liu unlocked the doors to his laboratory, he gave his visitors fair warning.

Bricks will be frozen and thawed 50 times to test strength.

"You will not be impressed with my lab," he said, smiling. "But you probably would not be impressed with Microsoft’s lab either when they started up."

Even though his work space — filled with plastic buckets of black “fly ash” and garbage bags stuffed with corn cobs and switch grass — did not look particularly high-tech, the inventions Liu creates inside his lab certainly are.

Nearly a decade ago, Liu, now 73, took early retirement from a highly successful career at the University of Missouri School of Engineering. He was an internationally acclaimed expert in pipeline engineering and helped MU land a prestigious National Science Foundation grant. The money went to fund a center for the study of pipeline technology for eight years.

But the professor knew he needed more time to tinker. Liu’s lifework was in the field of capsule pipeline technology. He and three colleagues had patented a pipeline transportation system that uses a linear induction motor to propel wheeled shipping containers through underground pipes to move freight cargo long distances. They envisioned the technology revolutionizing and “greening” the shipping industry. Someday, they thought, it might negate the need for many planes, trains and trucks.

The only problem was the NSF project was funded in part by energy companies that were concerned with one thing: a cheap way to transport coal from mines in Wyoming to electric plants in Missouri. The companies wanted Liu and his team to focus on ways to condense coal into logs and float them inside water-filled pipes.

Ultimately, Liu said, despite great strides in this “coal log” technology, none of the energy companies was willing to make the large capital outlays necessary to build hundreds of miles of piping. The NSF research was used more as leverage against railroad companies to keep prices low instead of a practical possibility, Liu said.

“I realized that if I’m going to pursue any of this, I’ve got to devote full time to it and seek a commercial use,” he said.
In 2000, Liu founded the Freight Pipeline Co. in an industrial office space on Maguire Boulevard. Although the company was intended to further the cause of pipeline transportation, he soon realized other spinoff technologies might prove for a quicker turnaround time.

One of those spinoffs capitalized on the technology MU researchers had helped develop to compact coal into smaller logs.

“As we compacted the coal, we developed a lot of engineering science,” Liu said. “I thought: Why don’t I use the technology for something else?”

While at MU, Liu learned he could compact fly ash, the residue left over when coal is burned in power plants. Now, he wanted to make it into commercially useable bricks. Fly ash is harmful to the environment and must be stored in large detention ponds. Liu estimated 15 percent of the fly ash in the United States could supply enough material for all the bricks used by U.S. builders.

“We knew fly ash was a material where a large quantity is wasted, so I said, ‘I would like to try it,’” Liu said. “So we took fly ash, put a little water in there and compacted it; and sure enough, we made good bricks that look like good bricks.”

The only problem was during development at MU, the bricks didn’t hold up. One of the tests any building block must pass is to survive at least 50 “freeze thaw” cycles. The fly ash bricks began to crumble apart after only a few cycles.

Liu solved that problem in 2004 by adding an agent to trap tiny air bubbles in the mixture. This made the bricks less brittle in cold temperatures. Next was the problem of safety. Fly ash is a hazardous substance that can contain toxins such as arsenic, lead and mercury. When millions of tons of the substance accidentally breached a levy in Kingston, Tenn., in December, the environmental impact was catastrophic. Would people actually feel comfortable having the ash in their homes?

Through exhaustive testing, Liu has shown that fly ash bricks do not release any mercury into the air and do not leech off toxins into water. Testing has shown the bricks to be safer than concrete in most respects, Liu said. And others agree.

“Had the bricks been available in Missouri a year ago, I probably would have approached whoever is making them to have them donated to the Eco Schoolhouse” at Grant Elementary School, said Nick Peckham, a local architect and Liu adviser. “I think that would have been a very appropriate exterior.”

Liu has licensed his patented brick-making technology to Newark, Calif.-based CalStar Products Inc., which hopes to have bricks commercially available to buyers in the spring. Every time Calstar makes a sale, Liu will receive a royalty. He also has licensed the technology to companies in 10 other countries.

From his office, Liu and engineering interns from MU are working to devise the right mixture of ingredients for different customers. Some, who buy fly ash from older electric plants, find it very
black and sooty because the plant's boiler does not burn off all the coal. Others lack limestone, which is important for cohesiveness.

Handling a light brownish-green block said to be the color "buff," Liu said the Western United States has some of the best fly ash in the world.

"We’re very blessed in this country," he said. "We have very good fly ash."

Liu's inventions don't stop there. Recently, his company won a grant from the U.S. Department of Energy to produce 3,000-pound compactors that can take items such as switch grass, corn leaves and stalks, and paper and squeeze them into fuel pellets.

He is partnering with students at MU's Bradford Research and Extension Center to test and assemble the devices.

George Vermont, a program officer for the NSF who has worked with Liu in the past, said a large part of Liu's success at winning grant money comes from his ability to line up suppliers and manufacturers who are eager to commercialize his research.

"He's a small operation; he has no manufacturing capability whatsoever, and it's only a five- or six-man operation," Vermont said. "But in terms of the overall front-end-to-back-end handling of a project, he does it very well."

All of this frenetic activity for a man of Liu's age recently caught the eye of the organizers of the Purpose Prize, which is given to older people in their "encore careers." Liu was one of five selected out of a group of more than 1,000 nominees to receive a $100,000 prize.

"He is a true social innovator," said Alexandra Kent, director of the Purpose Prize. "He took a risk and left a 35-year career as a professor to start a business to develop technology that would lessen our dependence on energy. The Purpose Prize really looks at what candidates will do next, and Henry is already working on two new technologies that he wants to bring to market."

Liu will accept the prize this weekend in a ceremony at Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif. He said he is humbled by the attention. Liu began his business as a way of promoting the freight pipeline technology but has found himself sidetracked in wonderful ways he never could have expected 10 years ago.

He continues to publish research and promote the technology — he spoke last week at the National Urban Freight Transport Conference in Long Beach, Calif. — and believes it still can be the wave of the future. More and more vehicles clog the highways each year because of freight transportation. Why not build a system of underground pipes to move freight safely and efficiently?
The expense of such an undertaking might mean Liu’s vision is far off, but he is holding out hope he’ll get to see it.

“Eventually it will come,” Liu said. “Civilization never stays the same for decades or centuries. But I’m just hoping I can see it in my lifetime.”
Ex-senator addresses MU forum

Daschle analyzes effort on health care reform.

By T.J. Greaney

Friday, October 30, 2009

Don’t throw a victory party yet. That was the message from former Sen. Majority Leader Tom Daschle this morning in a speech to health care professionals, students and legislators in Columbia.

Tom Daschle:
Former Senate majority leader

Addressing the University of Missouri’s seventh annual Health Policy Summit at the Hilton Garden Inn, Daschle called the likelihood of passing health care reform legislation “about 60 percent.”

“I don’t think it’s anywhere near as much of a certainty as some might suggest,” said Daschle, a Democrat who represented South Dakota in the U.S. Senate. “We still have so many obstacles out there, and there still is a lot of work to be done.”

Speaking in calm, professorial tones and wearing red horn-rimmed glasses, Daschle gave an insider’s view of the what lies ahead.

- On the so-called “public option,” or a safety-net insurance option operated by the federal government, Daschle said something will likely appear in the final legislation, but he doubts it will be a robust, no-strings-attached public option.

“Most likely, it would be one that involves a great deal of flexibility among states whether it’s opt-in or opt-out,” he said.

“If I had to guess today, I think the best thing we’re going to get is a trigger,” Daschle said.

The “trigger” term refers to a minimum threshold of people covered with affordable insurance premium rates.

If the numbers drop below the threshold, Daschle said, then a public option would automatically be offered.
On the issue of bending the health care cost curve so rising costs do not swallow up greater percentages of the federal gross domestic product, Daschle said progress would be slow. Some controversial “delivery reform” proposals that set guidelines for patient care and closely monitor outcomes and costs would do the trick, but they will encounter stiff resistance, he said.

“It will be evolutionary, and it certainly won’t be immediate,” said Daschle, who had been nominated by President Barack Obama for secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services in November but withdrew amid a controversy over unpaid back taxes.

He stressed he believes something must change. When the United States spends more money per person than any other nation and has patient outcomes rated in the middle of the pack, the system is broken, he said.

On the legislative schedule, Daschle said congressional Democrats’ goal is to put a bill on the president’s desk to sign into law before Christmas. However, he said, that hinges on getting 60 votes in the Senate to avoid a Republican filibuster. Failing that, the Senate version must go on the “budget track” where it would require only 50 votes but could lose as much as one-third of its content.

Ron Levy, director of the Missouri Department of Social Services, said the implications of health care reform would be enormous for Missouri. It could mean $2.2 billion invested annually in the state to do things such as modernize the health records system and expand coverage.

“This is an opportunity that we may not see again in our lifetime,” he said.

Organizers of the event said heightened attention to health care makes the conference, which continues this afternoon, more vital than ever.

“The energy level is higher than I’ve ever seen,” said Kris Hagglund, director of MU’s public health program.

“It’s a terribly complicated issue, and there is a lot of misinformation being distributed. Our purpose is to try and provide straightforward talk about the complexities of this reform issue so we can make good decisions,” said Hagglund.

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Former Sen. Tom Daschle heads health care summit

By Matthew Reinig
October 30, 2009 | 11:59 a.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — Former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle told a crowd of hundreds of health care professionals that per person health care spending has risen 40 percent in the last decade and that if costs are not contained, the average family in Missouri will pay roughly $25,616 in 2016.

"It is imperative that we get something done," he said. "And we are hopeful this is the year we do it."

Daschle was the keynote speaker at the Seventh Annual Missouri Health Policy Summit on Friday at the Hilton Garden Inn conference center. Among the roughly 250 people in attendance were doctors from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, MU Health Care, Biological Services, MU's School of Medicine and the Center for Health Policy.

Daschle was President Obama's first choice nominee for Secretary of Health and Human Services, but he withdrew after disclosing that he failed to pay $140,000 in taxes and interest.

Between work at a private sector law firm and a couple of political think tanks, Daschle has been flying around the country and speaking to "groups like this one," he said, about the urgency of reforming the U.S. health care system.

According to a report by Democratic Policy Committee that cited the Kaiser Family Foundation, premiums for employer-sponsored insurance have more than doubled over the last nine years, which is a growth rate four times faster than cumulative wage increases.
In 1997, the average family's costs were $4,872 in Missouri. In 2006, the report said, employer-sponsored insurance costs in the state rose to about $11,171.

"When Starbucks spends more on health care than coffee ... we know there's a problem," Daschle said.

Daschle said that though health care reform has been attempted many times in the past 100 years, he thinks health care reform has more momentum now than ever.

"This is by far the farthest this process has gone," he said.

The House unveiled its health care reform bill Thursday: the Affordable Health Care for America Act, or House Resolution 3962, which is a blend of two bills. Daschle told the crowd he expects the Senate to unveil a health reform bill in the next week and for debate to begin soon thereafter.

If the Senate can get the 60 votes before Thanksgiving, Daschle said, the House and Senate will hold conferences and might have a bill on President Obama's desk before Christmas Day. If they can't get the votes, he said, the proposed bill goes to the budget track.

"That remains as the legislative part B," Daschle said.

When asked how he felt about Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., reviving the public option in his proposed bill, Daschle said he supported it.

"I applaud Sen. Reid for his extraordinary leadership on this issue," he said. "The public option, in my view, is critical to the process and ultimately to our efforts at reform."

Daschle said Reid's proposed legislation will enjoy a majority of support in the Senate and that he was not concerned about Sen. Olympia Snowe's withdrawal of support.

"I'm a big admirer of Olympia Snowe," he said. "I think Sen. Snowe wants to get to yes, and I think she is going to persist in her efforts to fashion a bill through amendments and through negotiations that she will support at the end of the day."

Daschle concluded that he believes the greatest obstacle to achieving health reform in the U.S. is ideological, centered on the proper role of government.
"Virtually every other country in the world has resolved it in favor of more — not less — government role, much like education or transportation."

The conference continued through most of the day.
COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Blue Ridge Elementary School students get lesson in hygiene

By Dan Brenner
October 30, 2009 | 2:03 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — Basic hygiene isn't quite rocket science.

It's more like a locomotive.

"Up like a rocket, down like a plane, back and forth like a choo-choo train," dental hygienist Sherry Powell said as she taught 90 first-graders and kindergartners at Blue Ridge Elementary School the proper method of brushing teeth.

Friday, two MU student organizations — the Student National Medical Association and the Minority Association of Pre-Health Students — visited the school and went from classroom to classroom providing basic hygiene tips.

The event was organized in conjunction with the regional Student National Medical Association conference going on this weekend at MU.

Vanessa Evoh, president of the Minority Association of Pre-Health Students, demonstrated the importance of thorough hand-washing by having four students apply to their hands a special Glo Germ lotion that illuminates germs under a black light. The hardest part for the rest of the children was sitting still and not jumping up to see the germs under the black light.

Next, the students washed their hands, while singing the ABCs, and watched all the germs disappear as they neared the end of the song. The vanishing trick drew exclamations of "Cool!" from the kindergarten crowd.
The student association members also acted out the concept of "stranger danger" through skits that dramatized the importance of sticking together and not talking to strangers.

Evoh said the idea for the event came up over the summer in discussions about possible community activities, and Blue Ridge Elementary was the most enthusiastic about bringing the future medical professionals to the school. Evoh said she had done a lot of volunteering growing up and attended health fairs with her mother, who was a teacher.

"We devised a way to do it on a small scale," she said. "Teaching kids little things will go a long way in overall health."

Ten-year veteran kindergarten teacher Nancy Duncan said she thought the event was wonderful, and an important learning experience for her class.
Marriages of convenience: Medical groups join with food companies

By RICK MONTGOMERY and ALAN BAVLEY The Kansas City Star

They may seem like odd couples, partners from opposite poles with a passion to help you lead a healthier life.

Or maybe it's about money.

Soda-pop makers courting medical groups. Potato-chip producers curling up with dietitians. Beer companies linking arms with traffic-safety advocates.

These marriages of convenience have become an increasingly common part of corporate America. That leaves consumers and government regulators wondering if we can trust all the advice coming from organizations that buddy up with industry.

The latest tryst with a twist involves the American Academy of Family Physicians. The Leawood-based organization represents about 94,000 doctors who struggle to get their patients to shed excess pounds.

From across the room, Coca-Cola bats its eyelashes. The queen of carbonated drinks is fending off attacks that its sugar-sweetened products promote obesity and should be taxed.

The two organizations last month sealed a deal that had Coca-Cola giving the academy a grant in the mid six figures to come up with health messages for the public about beverages and sweeteners.

The academy and Coca-Cola said the information would be based on objective science.

But doctors, nutrition experts and consumer advocates charge that Coca-Cola is proffering the money just to improve its reputation and possibly to buy the academy's silence.

In various toasts to our health, bedfellows of the strangest kind are everywhere and go back decades. The study of alcoholism owes much to the distilled-spirits industry, which teamed with Cornell University and the National Institute of Health on research as early as the 1940s.

Now an increasingly skeptical and health-conscious public, with so much information at its fingertips, isn't sure whose advice to trust, said Shelly Rodgers, a University of Missouri researcher of strategic communications: "Consumers instantly see the conflict and go, 'What? What?' "

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recently announced it would take aim at questionable health claims on food packaging. Some logos that attest to a product's nutritional value — such as the "Smart Choice" checkmark on Froot Loops — are backed by reputable professional associations in partnership with cereal mills and snack makers.

For companies such as Coca-Cola, it's about "innocence by association. They want to look good," said Michael Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a consumer group that ties soft drinks to obesity.

"There's no better way to burnish their health image than to stand shoulder to shoulder with a respected medical organization."

STORY CONTINUES.....
Farmers fight climate bill, but warming spells trouble for them

BY RENEE SCHOOF AND DAVID GOLDSTEIN

WASHINGTON

Farm state senators and others soon will get a taste of what their colleagues from Missouri already have piled high on their desks: thousands of letters from farmers urging them to vote against the climate and energy bill.

The Missouri Farm Bureau started the letter campaign early, weeks before the bill was fully written and made public. It was followed in October with a pitch from the American Farm Bureau, the nation's largest agriculture lobby, to get farmers to take farm caps, sign their bills and send them to senators with notes that say, "Don't cap our future."

Agriculture is likely to have a central place in the debate on the bill later this year about the short-term costs of acting to curb climate change - and the costs of failing to address the long-term risks.

Farm lobby groups and senators who agree with them argue that imposing limits on the nation's emissions of heat-trapping gases from coal, oil and natural gas would raise the cost of farming necessities such as fuel, electricity and natural gas-based fertilizer. A government report, however, warns of a dire outlook for farms if rising emissions drive more rapid climate shifts in the decades ahead.

The Senate bill includes provisions that would hold down energy costs for consumers, and some senators are working to add sections that would help farmers.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in written testimony while traveling in China last week that the bill would create opportunities for farmers to sell renewable energy and to earn money by selling credits for reducing emissions. He also said the bill contained provisions that would prevent fertilizer price increases before 2025, even though fuel prices would rise.
The benefits of the bill probably will outweigh the costs in the short run, and "easily trump" increased costs in the long run, he said.

Others are worried, however.

"I can understand in the political world why they're trying to get this under control," said Bill Wiebold, a University of Missouri agronomist, a scientist who specializes in crop production and soil. "What are the ripple effects? That's what farmers are concerned about. They understand that what's being passed in Washington, D.C., could have a direct effect on their bottom line."

Another side of the cost question will be the burden on the daughters and sons who succeed today's farmers, and the generations after them. A comprehensive review of scientific literature and government data undertaken by a team of 19 U.S. scientists at the end of the Bush administration and released in June forecast a disturbing future for American agriculture as warming accelerates in the decades ahead.

The report, "Global Change Impacts in the United States," is the most comprehensive U.S. effort so far to move from a global view of rising temperatures due to accumulating greenhouse gases to a more regionally focused look at current and future changes.

The key messages on agriculture:

- Early on, some warming and elevated carbon-dioxide levels may be good for some crops, but higher levels of warming impair plant growth and yields. More frequent heat waves, for example, would be hard on crops such as corn and soybeans.

- Other more frequent extremes, such as heavy downpours and droughts, also would be likely to reduce crop yields.

- The quality of grazing land will decline, and heat and disease will be harder on livestock.

- Finally, warming will be good for something: pests and weeds.

"This is going to have profound effects on agriculture and forests around the world," said William Hohenstein, the director of the Global Change Program at the Department of Agriculture.

It's not clear how agriculture might adapt to a changing climate and at the same time improve productivity to help meet the needs of a growing population.
"We may not keep up," said Melanie Fitzpatrick, an Australian glaciologist and science adviser to the Union of Concerned Scientists. The environmental advocacy group recently produced reports on climate change in Midwestern states.

Jere White, the executive director of the Kansas Corn Growers Association, said that farmers might be leery of predicted climate changes because "they have a perspective of having to appreciate what occurred with the weather over a fairly long period of time. It's not an abstract issue to them. It's part of their livelihood."

Climate scientists, in reports such as those used in the government study, say that while the weather will keep varying from year to year, the long-term warming trend that's already being observed will continue and accelerate. The severity of the warming will depend on the amount of heat-trapping gases that build up in the atmosphere.

Richard Oswald, 59, grows corn and soybeans and raises cattle with his son on 2,000 acres in Rock Port, in Missouri's northwest corner. He's the chairman of the board of the Missouri Farmers Union, which is part of the National Farmers Union, a group that supports a mandatory cap on emissions and a trading scheme for pollution permits, as long as farmers' concerns are met.

"We can either get behind this and push this legislation in a direction that will help farmers, or we can sit back and fight it all the way and get something we really don't want," Oswald said.

Sen. Saxby Chambliss of Georgia, the Agriculture Committee's ranking Republican, said he'd oppose the bill because it would bring "economic pain for no benefit" and would "only hurt farmers, ranchers and forest landowners, and provide them no opportunity to recoup the higher costs they will pay."

"The huge taxes on carbon would be devastating to Midwest farmers," said Sen. Kit Bond, R-Mo.

The bill would charge large sources of emissions, such as power plants, for the amount of greenhouse gases they produce. Farms wouldn't be required to reduce their emissions.

As those limits further tighten, businesses would have to find ways to comply or pay more.

Some of those penalty payments would be used to help vulnerable industries and consumers. Energy costs would rise, but how that would affect Americans would depend on the policies the law imposed.
Sen. Mike Johanns, R-Neb., who was the secretary of agriculture for several years during the Bush administration, said that higher energy costs were certain if the bill passed. He wasn't convinced by the government study that climate changes are equally certain.

It's important to know "the predictability of the studies relative to what climate change could look like," Johanns said. "That gets tougher. The USDA is only starting to dig into that."

He said the report on climate changes in the U.S. was "based on some studies I think are incomplete."

The USDA had a lead role in the agriculture section of the study. The report's conclusions drew from a large body of scientific reports.

Richard Krause, an American Farm Bureau lobbyist, said his group wouldn't dispute the study, but he stressed that it was "about future events, based on models and assumptions."

Unless China, India and other developing countries also reduce emissions, "we're going to be spending money on something for very little return," Krause said. "All the impacts are going to happen anyway."

The U.S., China and other countries have started to move toward cleaner sources of energy, but studies conclude that more changes will be needed to prevent dangerous climate shifts. Climate scientists, meanwhile, say that climate disasters aren't a given but can be averted by large reductions starting soon.

"Most farmers are just sort of skeptical," said Oswald, the farmer and Missouri Farmers Union board chairman. "You're out every day working to overcome adversity from the government, adversity from Mother Nature, adversity from the market. You learn not to put all your eggs in one basket. That's where we are now with climate change. Farmers aren't willing to sign off on all of it."