

The External Advisory Board met with CERH investigators and staff at Texas A&M on Thursday October 31, 2002. The Agenda began with a welcome from Dr. Richard Adams, Dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine, followed by an overview of Center activities by Dr. Ramos, Center Director. The Center continues to make outstanding progress as measured by any of a number of benchmarks including collaborative research, joint publications, collaborative grants and outreach activities. Several new initiatives for the Center were also discussed including an increased emphasis on neurological deficits, with studies planned in the areas of Alzheimers and Parkinson's disease. Another new initiative is the incorporation of epidemiologists from Environmental Epidemiology from the School of Public Health into research programs from Reproductive and Developmental and Biostatistics and Community Health Research Cores. This new direction is clearly in line with the mission and research priorities of NIEHS and the CERH is encouraged to continue to grow their research in these areas. In addition, CERH investigators have been notified that they will be awarded a \$1.5 million grant from the Life Sciences Task Force of A&M to build a Genomics and Bioinformatics program at the University. This support will be invaluable for building the planned toxicogenomics effort within the Center and is reflective of the outstanding institutional commitment on the part of the University to the Center.

A new format was used for Research and Facility Core presentations, with fewer, but longer presentations given. This format allowed for a more in-depth presentation and evaluation of Core activities, which was appreciated by the EAB. The two research Cores that presented were Reproductive and Developmental and Nutrition. This selection was particularly timely, with the recent return of Dr. Finnell as Director of the Reproductive and Developmental Research Core. Dr. Finnell is a senior and talented individual who brings leadership ability and outstanding scientific expertise to this Core. Dr. Finnell's leadership also offers opportunities for increased interaction between Center members in College Station and the IBT in Houston. Dr. Lupton's presentation of the Nutrition Research Core was outstanding. She has been able to invigorate this core with her leadership and direction. The extensive interactions between the Nutrition and the Biostatistics and Community Health Cores is a real strength of the Center, with several joint Nutrition/Biostatistics RO1s and Training grants shared by these investigators.

Three of the Facility Cores were presented: Analytical, Protein Technologies and Transgenics. The Protein Technologies Core appears to be well established and effectively meeting the needs of Center investigators. This Core has an excellent program for training Center investigators, which enhances the ability of the Core to serve a large number of investigators. However, there are several critical issues looming on the horizon for this Core, with increased usage of data-rich technologies that will challenge currently available storage and analysis capabilities. This Core is expected to receive significant funds from the Life Sciences Initiative grant and it is important that a concerted effort be made to develop a long-range plan in the area of data management to support future research efforts. The Analytical Facility Core also appears to be at a critical decision point, with demand on the Core exceeding their ability to supply services. Although Center investigators are given priority, it is clear that this Core will

need to address how they handle the demand for services such as  $^{32}\text{P}$ -postlabeling, which are currently saturating the Core capabilities. Currently, this Core provides its services free-of-charge to Center members, with the goal of allowing CERH members to generate preliminary data that can be used to obtain extramural funding. While this is clearly an excellent use of the Core, it may be necessary to consider a charge-back system that will allow the Core to generate funds to expand and increase their staff to meet the very large demand on their services. The transgenic Core is currently undergoing a reorganization, with the departure of Dr. Piedrahita from the University and the addition of Dr. Martin to the center in August. It is clear that this Core has yet to co-ordinate the efforts of the Molecular Biology, Microinjection and Pathology components, and the reorganization of this Core should be a priority for the Center Director. Drs. Martin and Kier are talented and able individuals and with additional guidance from the Director should be able to overcome the challenges inherent in having a Core based at two institutions. Stabilization of Core support staff, which has been a challenge in the past, is expected to contribute to the future success of this Core.

Dr. Ramos also discussed plans to merge the Biostatistics and Computation Facility Core with the Genomics and Bioinformatics Core. This merger will allow the CERH to direct additional resources into bioinformatics initiatives, commensurate with the emerging emphasis on Toxicogenomics and Bioinformatics within the Center. The EAB supported this reorganization as timely and appropriate. One caveat was that the Director should monitor the reaction of CERH members to ensure that they are able to obtain statistical services for their more “routine” needs through the Core or through collaborations with members of the Biostatistics and Community Health Research Core.

During its visit, the EAB was informed of the departure of Dr. Ramos from the CERH. Dr. Ramos has done an outstanding job as Director of the Center and will be sorely missed. The Center is fortunate, however, that Dr. Steven Safe, the original Director of the CERH, will become Interim Director upon Dr. Ramos' departure until a new Center Director is named. Dr. Safe is expected to continue the outstanding record of success of this Center begun under his leadership during this interim period, and his acceptance of this position is welcomed and endorsed by the EAB. As Dr. Safe indicated that he intends to serve only in an 'interim' capacity (the exact period of time remains to be negotiated), it will be important for the University administration to ensure that adequate effort and resources are committed to the recruitment of an outstanding new Director. The SAB encourages an 'outside' search for this position. This provides a unique opportunity for Texas A&M to further strengthen its program in environmental health sciences by adding another senior leader in this field.