

“Building and increasing research capacity to improve the health of Alaska Natives”



News from the CENTER for ALASKA NATIVE HEALTH RESEARCH

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Bert Boyer, CANHR's acting director, meets with CANHR's Biostatistics Core staff. L-R: Salena Bias, Maria Anastario, Boyer, Johanna Herron, and Jacques Philip.

Boyer's vision

For as much time as Bert Boyer has spent in the Yukon Kuskokwim delta for the past seven years, he thought he had a pretty good understanding of Yup'ik culture.

But at an international physical activity conference this past spring, he learned scientists are now finding that just doing busy work, even if it means standing up and walking around, increases insulin sensitivity in cells, necessary for proper use of the body's blood sugar, he said.

Yup'ik elders have been saying for years: "Always keep busy," he said.

"They've been telling us but we haven't been listening," Boyer said. "Movement makes your large muscles work and they are more insulin sensitive. They've known this all the time."

Boyer has been named acting director of the Center for Alaska Native Health Research. He presented his CANHR vision during a seminar on May 20 as part of his candidacy for the permanent position. He underlined what the late Gerald Mohatt, CANHR's past director, taught him about including Alaska Native people as active participants, contributors and collaborators to CANHR's research projects.

. . . Boyer vision continued on pg. 7

Fairbanks/Bethel to get clinical research facilities

The National Institutes of Health has awarded the University of Alaska Fairbanks a \$7.5 million grant to create new clinical health research facilities in Fairbanks and Bethel.

The money will fund renovations of two buildings, one each in Fairbanks and Bethel, and will support ongoing research at the Center for Alaska Native Health Research aimed at eliminating health disparities among Alaska Native people. The work is to start in 2011.

In Bethel, the empty Vocational Technology Building at the UAF Kuskokwim Campus will become a 378-square-foot clinical and nutritional assessment suite, which will include space for phlebotomy, physical activity measurements, body measurements and nutritional data collection. The renovation project will also create a facility to allow long-distance research interviews between Yukon

. . . Fairbanks/Bethel continued on pg. 5



CANHR welcomes new staff, faculty and President Professor

John Himes, Ph.D., is CANHR's newest President's Professor of Biomedical Research. He is an epidemiology professor in the Public Health Nutrition, and Maternal and Child Health department at the University of Minnesota. Himes' research interests closely align with CANHR's: nutritional epidemiology, nutritional status assessment, obesity, dietary intake assessment and applied statistical analysis. He is a member of the Obesity Prevention Center and executive advisor for the Nutrition Coordinating Center, both located at U of M. UAF Phone: (907) 474-6186. Email: himes001@umn.edu.



Himes



Rasmus

Awakening Project with Jerry Mohatt and others, and Alaska children mental health issues. Before coming to CANHR she was the lead evaluator and principal investigator of the research component for the Lummi System of Care Initiative with the Washington State University. Phone: (907) 474-7352. Email: smasmus@alaska.edu.

Deena Dubois likely will be the first person people talk to when calling CANHR. She is the administrative assistant in the Administrative Core. Phone: (907) 474-5528. Email: Dcote8@alaska.edu.



Dubois



York

Alison York, Ph.D., joined CANHR in December 2009 as the resource navigator for the center's new eagle-i consortium project (see pg. 3). She is a zoologist with broad and varied experience. Her research interests are in comparative neuroscience, behavior, and physiology. Phone: (907) 474-7731. Email: ayork@alaska.edu.



Bias

Salena Bias is a data technician in CANHR's Epidemiology and Biostatistics Core. Phone: (907) 474-7277. Email: skbias@alaska.edu.

Cristiane Kaufmann is the Eskimo Collaboration Project coordinator. Phone: (907) 474-6458. Email: ckaufmann@alaska.edu.



Kaufmann

Monica Skewes, Ph.D., is the center's new intervention specialist faculty and assistant psychology professor. She earned her doctorate from the University of Texas at El Paso. Her research interests include evidence-based treatment for substance use disorders among underserved populations, minority health disparities, health literacy and health communication, harm reduction and Motivational Interviewing, and cross-cultural psychological measurement. She is especially interested in the interaction of culture, mental illness, substance abuse, and motivation to change. Phone: (907) 474-7326. Email: mskewes@alaska.edu.



Skewes



Philip

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Marjorie Richards is a research nurse. Phone: (907) 474-6588. Email: marichards@alaska.edu.



Richards

Ellen López, MPH, Ph.D., joined CANHR last year as an assistant professor of public health. Currently she is interested in Alaska Native cancer survivorship and is working toward establishing cancer research collaborative project to elucidated and address factors that impact the continuum of cancer—prevention, early detection, treatment, and control/survivorship—experienced by rural, indigenous, and other vulnerable populations. Phone: (907) 474-7318. Email: edlopez@alaska.edu.



López



Peter-Raboff

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eagle-i looks north for unseen biomedical resources

When told about a \$15 million grant from the National Institutes of Health to develop an Internet tool to help researchers find hidden biomedical resources, many people ask, “But can’t they Google that?”



NIH funded the project precisely because of the limitations Google or other search engines have for working scientists, explains Alison York. The project involves nine universities including the University of Alaska Fairbanks and York is UAF’s resource navigator for the project, dubbed the eagle-i consortium.

She noted that search engines can only find the information that people place on the web. Researchers don’t post their work all the time, and likely few of them electronically publish what the consortium is looking for. Scientists looking for information about resources need that information organized in a consistent way.

“Think of biomedical labs as libraries and right now we’re developing a catalog system for them,” York said.

The consortium will inventory biomedical resources among the nine universities— Dartmouth College, Harvard Medical School, Jackson State University, Morehouse School of Medicine, Montana State University, Oregon Health & Science University, University of Hawaii at Manoa and the University of Puerto Rico, as well as UAF.

The group is not seeking research findings, but rather information about the protocols, equipment, procedures, etc., used in the research. The listing of research resources, including animal models, tissue banks, reagents and human health study protocols, will be used to develop a prototype search system.

UAF, through the Center for Alaska Native Health Research, will receive \$1.1 million over two years for the project. UAF’s contributions will include information about the community-based participatory research approach used by CANHR investigators and the biomedical applications of natural animal models such as hibernators, York said.

\$1.15 million grant to study Alaska Native grandparenting roles

Tammy Henderson wants to understand how Alaska Native grandparents see their roles in the lives of their grandchildren.



Henderson

Henderson, an associate professor at Oklahoma State University, will partner with CANHR’s Jim Allen and UAF assistant professor Jordan Lewis, to investigate modern Alaska Native grandparenting through a \$1.15 million National Science Foundation grant, of which the University of Alaska Fairbanks

received a \$481,000 subaward.

Henderson, Lewis and Allen want to focus on what Alaska Native grandparents do well and what their needs and concerns could be.

“We’ve not really studied the contribution of grandparents,” Henderson said.

The group will begin by forming guiding councils with Alaska Natives from the Interior, Bristol Bay and the Yukon Kuskokwim areas of Alaska. They want the councils to provide oversight and guidance.

The councils will ensure the research is culturally relevant and of value to the region, communities and participants, Lewis said.

The team isn’t really sure what they will find, although they have some ideas of what they will discover, Henderson said. Some grandparents could be taking on traditional Native grandparenting roles, according to the customs of their particular culture. Others may have adopted a more Western approach, where they view themselves more as the entertainers instead of nurturers.

Or many could be taking on parenting responsibilities.

“We don’t know,” Henderson said.

Whatever they find has to be viewed from a cultural and historical perspective, she said. This is part of what Henderson calls emancipatory research, where the group being studied brings their own knowledge to the research and helps interpret findings, with the goal to empower and provide services for the community.

Henderson praised CANHR’s late director, Jerry Mohatt, for having the foresight to see the need for such research and how CANHR could help. He long believed Alaska Natives and Native Americans have answers for health and social problems among themselves.



Lewis



Goodbye, Dr. Mohatt, hello Dr. Mohatt

In Yup'ik tradition, the first child born after a death gets the departed's Eskimo name.

The late Jerry Mohatt didn't have an Eskimo name, so baby boy Jameson Ayunerak, of Alakanuk, is also known as Dr. Gerald Mohatt.

And little Dr. Mohatt smiles and coos when people talk to him, reports Paula Ayunerak, the boy's grandmother.

"I tell him, 'You'll be the smartest one in your class,'" Ayunerak said. "He's special."

The elder Mohatt died after a long battle with chronic lymphocytic leukemia Feb. 10, 2010. He was the director, co-founder and principal investigator of the Center for Alaska Native Health Research.

Mohatt, 69, left a legacy as educator, administrator, and innovator; however, among the nation's indigenous people he is remembered as an advocate. His career started at the Rosebud Lakota Reservation, where he helped found the Sinte Gleska University. It ended among the Yup'ik of Alaska's Yukon Kuskokwim delta, where he oversaw research in obesity, genetics, nutrition and contaminants in subsistence foods, substance abuse prevention, and suicide prevention.

Mohatt believed Native people's inherent strengths could be used in eliminating health disparities and



Robby Mohatt, Gerald Mohatt's wife, holds Jameson Ayunerak, also known as Dr. Gerald Mohatt. Nate Mohatt, Jerry's and Robby's son, is to the left.

based CANHR's mission on this belief, his colleagues say.

"One thing that characterized his whole career was a commitment to social justice and self-determination to American Indians and Alaska Native people," Bert Boyer, CANHR's acting director, told the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner the day of Mohatt's death.

"He really appreciated us sharing with him," Ayunerak said later. "He was very compassionate."

Michael Sayre, CANHR's program official with the National Institutes of Health's National Center for Research Resources, said Mohatt was able to expand on his commitment to Native people by finding resources to fund beneficial research projects.

"The important new collaboration between CANHR and the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium launched last year with ARRA funding wouldn't have happened without Jerry's strong leader-

From Desert to Sand
for dad

A beggar stream
breaks
from our eyes

onto hard-cracked
desert—
turns

sand to mud,
mud to grain—
becomes

more
than a meal of tears.
As you, of me,

belief
in white robes
of priests and scientists

lays fist
on the plain,
spreads open

the palm, sings
water to the valley,
salt-heavy,

churned.
Lucidity and thirst
pulls

its self
from itself.

Nate Mohatt



Clinical research space means much to Bethel/Fairbanks

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Kuskokwim delta communities and the Fairbanks campus. Renovations in Bethel will use nearly \$3.8 million of the grant.

“This means so much to the Bethel and the YK delta as far as providing jobs and education opportunities,” said Mary Pete, director of the Kuskokwim Campus. “This also means community members will have a physical location where they can go to help find solutions to many of the health problems our people face.”

On the UAF campus, about \$3.6 million in renovations will create mirror facilities in the Arctic Health Research Building but with

additional space for stable isotope analyses. The project will fill in the atrium area at Arctic Health and add 1,566 square feet of research and office space, said Bert Boyer, CANHR’s acting director.

“The new labs and offices will build on the relationships we have with the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation and the Yup’ik communities where we’ve all been working for the last eight years to reduce health disparities,” said Boyer. “We view our research participants as partners and this project will give us more opportunities to build on that partnership.”

Boyer added the \$7.5 million award is also a reflection of the eight-year relationship between UAF and NIH’s National Center for Research Resources, the agency that granted \$11 million in 2001

to start establish CANHR. In 2007 NCRP granted another \$11 million to continue work for another five years.

Thanks to that and other substantial commitment by the National Institutes of Health, UAF’s biomedical and health research programs have grown in the past 10 years, said Brian Barnes, director of the Institute of Arctic Biology, which oversees CANHR. NIH’s backing demonstrates UAF’s success in the health research on a national level, he said.

“This growth and success means an increased demand for high-quality research and education facilities,” Barnes said. “These facilities complement the proposed Life Sciences building and will allow our faculty members to build on their vital research projects and prepare the next generation of scientists.”



**Gerald Vincent
Mohatt**
1940-2010

Dr. Mohatts *continued from pg. 4*

ship and vision for expanding health disparities research to other Alaska Native communities across the state,” Sayre said. (see CANHR grows page 6).

Mohatt was recognized across his career, including praise as an author for his book “The Price of a Gift.” He was the 2004 recipient of the Victor E. Howery Award for Contributions to Rural Mental Health from the National Rural Health Association.

“I believe if we grapple with ideas that come from the people whose land this is and has been, who are the first people of this land, we can serve them better,” Mohatt said in his acceptance speech. “I also think that the knowledge we gain will help us see avenues for working with all people in a deeper and more respectful manner.”

In Alakanuk, it appears young Dr. Mohatt has big shoes to fill. Yup’iks believe that Mohatt’s spirit is with the baby and he is now an ancestor. Robby Mohatt, Jerry’s widow, gave the boy books and toy basketballs all packed in Jerry’s favorite briefcase since Jerry was an avid reader and star basketball player while in school.

The child, at three months old, is losing his baby hair in the front, she said.

“He looks more like his namesake,” Ayunerak said. “I told him he’d get his hair back.”



CANHR researchers, Andrea Bersamin and Ellen Lopez, and Dominick Lemas, CANHR graduate student, attended a CBPR training last fall at UAF.



Filma Peter, Anna Angaiak, Billy Charles, and Denis Sheldon meet with Walkie Charles for a Bethel-based training.

Marjie Richards, CANHR research nurse, and Cristiane Kaufmann, Eskimo Collaboration Project coordinator, mail out 1,200 re-consent forms to CANHR participants.



CANHR grows, learns and teaches

The center’s field research assistants have a huge contribution of knowledge to give toward CANHR’s success, said Scarlett Hopkins, CANHR’s Culture and Intervention Core co-leader.

Now with \$1.8 million in grants from NIH, as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), CANHR researchers and staff can benefit from that knowledge as the money will be used in part for trainings.

“Our field researchers are our eyes, ears and really, our voice,” Hopkins said. “I share knowledge. They share knowledge. The combined knowledge is how we do research.”

CANHR has held three trainings with field research assistants, providing an overview of CANHR projects, biomedical research ethics, and data and dissemination skills. The center also held four CBPR trainings for university and tribal health corporation researchers, led by health disparities experts.

The money has also been used to hire a summer bilingual science teacher and further train a staff medical epidemiologist.

In another funded proposal, called Eskimo Collaboration Project, CANHR will join other Alaska research centers to combine four Alaska Inupiat and Yup’ik health research data sets, representing almost 4,000 people. The database will give scientists and participants a better understand of Alaska Eskimo health risks and protections for chronic diseases such as diabetes or cardiovascular disease.

A need for cancer survivor support

Alaska Natives are less likely to survive five years beyond an initial cancer diagnosis, nevertheless, those survivorship numbers are improving, according to a recent Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium report.

CANHR investigator Ellen López and UAF student Gail Denning want to help find ways to improve the quality of life for cancer survivors.

“Although increased survival can be viewed as a gift, this gift often comes at a price to survivors, their loved ones, communities and the health care system,” López said. “The transition from active treatment to cancer survivor can be replete with turmoil and uncertainty.”

López and Denning held the first Alaska Native Cancer Gathering in Fairbanks this spring, in partnership with the Fairbanks Native Association. About 30 people attended and expressed interest in meeting monthly. Through these gatherings, and other participatory endeavors, López and Denning hope to provide a safe environment where cancer concerns can be discussed, and ideas for addressing these needs can be shared.

“Our goal is to develop a strong collaborative cancer research program that will involve and benefit Alaska Native communities that are experiencing the complex issues associated with cancer.”

The next Alaska Native Cancer Gathering will be August 10 at the Hannah Solomon Building in Fairbanks. Diana Campbell, CANHR communication specialist, will discuss the perspectives she gained about the Alaska Native cancer experience while writing her newspaper series “In Cancer’s Grip.”

For information, call López at (907) 474-7318.



CANHR student successes

Jordan Lewis successfully defended his Ph.D. dissertation, “Successfully aging through the eyes of Alaska Native elders: What it means to be an elder in Bristol Bay, AK.” After completing a year as an assistant professor at UAF and CANHR research associate, Lewis will begin work in the Elder Care and Research departments at the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium this fall. Jerry Mohatt was his advisor.

Tonie Marie Quaintance has been named a Andrew W. Mellon Dissertation Fellowship winner for 2010-2011. She presented with advisor Inna Rivkin at the recent Western Region COBRE-INBRE Conference, and presented a poster at the NIH/NCRR National IDeA Symposium of Biomedical Research Excellence this June.

Dominick Lemas attended the 2010 spring semester at the University of Alabama Birmingham studying statistics with CANHR consultant Hermant Tiwant. The courses were for Lemas’ work with the genetics of obesity project. Bert Boyer is his advisor.

Marie Bray had a poster presentation at the 3rd International Congress on Physical Activity and Public Health in Toronto this spring. She is Boyer’s student.

Sarah Nash was the lead author on “Relation between stable isotope ratios in human red blood cells and hair: implications for using the nitrogen isotope ratio of hair as a biomarker of eicosa-pentaenoic acid and docosahexaenoic acid.” It appeared in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* in December 2009. She will present her research at the 7th Advanced Seminar on Palaeodiet, held in June 2010 at Cambridge University. She is also helping organize the 7th International Applications of Stable Isotope Techniques to Ecological Research Conference, to be held at UAF, Aug. 9-13, 2010, with her advisor Diane O’Brien.

Johanna Herron started work on her master’s degree project by conducting a statewide survey of school food service professionals to understand barriers, interest, current practices, and future needs to including Alaskan foods in school meal programs. Her project is called Project MEALS: More Eating of Alaskan-based Lunches in Schools. She is Andrea Bersamin’s student.

. . . Student successes continued on pg. 8

Boyer’s vision *continued from pg. 1*

“The point is you can learn some things in the conversation if your brain is prepared to listen,” he said.

Boyer was one of CANHR’s founding architects along with Mohatt in 2001, the result of a \$11 million grant from the National Institutes of Health’s National Center for Research Resources.

It will take a team effort for CANHR to be sustainable over the next 20 years, Boyer said. The foundation of the effort will continue to be community-based participatory research, the idea that human and other biomedical research is conducted in an equal partnership between the researcher and the community involved. Add respect, reciprocity, responsibility and that brings better communication, he said.

“When we do these things, I think we build trust,” Boyer said. “This leads to sustainability.”

He’d like CANHR to become internationally known for CBPR with Alaska Native people.

CANHR shouldn’t grow without direction, he said.

CANHR’s

mission statement is the guide: “To build and increase research capacity that will contribute knowledge to improve Alaska Native health.” He’d like to provide additional resources for CANHR investigators to become more competitive for NIH grants. He also wants to strengthen ties between CANHR cores—administrative, nutrition, epidemiology and biostatistics, biological specimens, and culture and intervention—as well as offer services to other researchers and interested people.

Most importantly, Boyer wants to make sure to keep up relationships with CANHR’s Alaska Native partners.

“We have to return something every time we go out there,” he said.



Bert Boyer explained his vision for CANHR on May 20.



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If you have news for the next newsletter or want to find out more about CANHR, contact Diana Campbell at (907) 474-5221 or dlcampbell@alaska.edu.

Student successes *continued from pg. 7*

Kate Cessnun, a recent UAF graduate with majors in biology and English, studied the diet quality of college-aged men, called Project NEW: Nanooks Eating Well. She is also Bersamin's student.

Tara Ford attended a meeting in Oslo, Norway as part of CANHR's Negotiating Pathways to Adulthood grant from the National Science Foundation. She is also working on the Elluum Tungiinun Project, a CANHR substance abuse and suicide prevention project. She is Jim Allen's student.

Welcome to the CANHR family, Phoebe O'Brien Wooller, born March 12, to Diane O'Brien and Matt Wooller. Owen is reported to be a proud big brother.