

# J OHNSTON COUNTY

Thurston Arthritis Research Center  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Issue No. 3 May, 1998

## Osteoarthritis Project Update

*Be a part of the search for a cure*

**W**elcome to the third edition of the *Johnston County Osteoarthritis Project Update*. We hope you find the newsletter interesting and informative.

### Project update from the Medical Director

Since our last newsletter, we have reached many milestones in the *Johnston County Osteoarthritis Project*. Most notably, we enrolled the last new study participant in February 1998. You are now one of 3,200 Johnston County men and women enrolled in the study! We have learned much from our preliminary analyses and have confirmed that osteoarthritis is very common in the county. Our task now is to figure out why this is so, and to do something about it.

We have presented our research findings each year at the national meeting of the Ameri-

can College of Rheumatology and in medical journals. I am happy to report to you that the field of research in osteoarthritis is growing fast, and I am sure that the *Johnston County Osteoarthritis Project* will provide some of the answers. We are continuing our work examining factors that might put a person at risk of developing arthritis or developing disability from it. Among the many factors we have examined are obesity, injury, occupational physical demands, other health conditions, and dietary factors, especially the role of vitamin E and other antioxidant vitamins.

We will be examining the role of diet in more detail and hope to be

able to examine bone mineral density as well when you all return for your follow up examinations. We have also launched our Genetics of Generalized Osteoarthritis Project (GOGO) to study hereditary factors involved in osteoarthritis that can affect the hands, knees, and hips in families (see inside, p. 3). We are also studying several new blood tests for their use in osteoarthritis.

We have spent a lot of time this past year speaking to different clubs and organizations to spread



Dr. Joanne Jordan

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### Dr. John Fryer is enjoying retirement

Dr. John Fryer, who has been with the Rural Health Research office since its opening in 1989, retired from UNC this year after a long career in biostatistics. His British accent and friendly face were a familiar presence in Johnston County because he personally drove around many of its towns to do mapping and recruitment for the *Johnston County Osteoarthritis Project*.

He did not mind devoting the extra time and effort because the people he met along the way were a constant reminder of his goal to help Johnston County residents. According to Wilma Howard, a friend as well as a co-worker of Dr. Fryer, "He had a genuine concern for the Johnston County residents that he met, and for the people who worked with him." She adds, "I love him and will miss

him." Another co-worker, Janice Woodard, says, "It was a pleasure working with him and I will really miss him."

Since his retirement, he and his wife Diane are traveling and seeing the world. We will certainly miss him, but we know he is enjoying life and wish him well.



Dr. John Fryer

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## Focus on our staff

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### Working on the GOGO study

Hilda Whitley, a Smithfield interviewer, has been working with the *Johnston County Osteoarthritis Project* for over four years and has recruited hundreds of people. She says she enjoys her job because it allows her to visit old friends and gives her the opportunity to meet new friends in the community she grew up in. She has been telling people about our new project on osteoarthritis in families for the past year and is excited that the Genetics of Generalized Osteoarthritis started in March. She already has a long list of people who want to participate. Hilda says she is eager to begin the search to help

all of the people she knows with hand arthritis. She knows the problems osteoarthritis in the fingers can cause because her husband has the enlarged, swollen finger joints typical of osteoarthritis. She has even recruited Mr. Whitley and his brother and sister for the study. She will be giving talks at local groups to identify people who qualify for the study and want to participate. At least 400 families are needed to identify the gene that causes osteoarthritis in families, so Hilda's role in recruiting is very important and she takes her job seriously. "I believe we need to find the cause for



*Hilda Whitley already has a list of people who want to be a part of the new genetics study*

arthritis," she says, "before we can find a cure." If you would like Mrs. Whitley to speak to your group, or if you want more information about this study, please call **Rural Health Research (919) 934-1295**.

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### Going back to Kenly

The first phase of the *Johnston County Osteoarthritis Project* ended in February when the last new participants came to clinics in Smithfield and Benson. Recruitment has ended and the follow-up phase is about to begin. Starting in the summer, we will contact the first Johnston County participants and return to Kenly to do the follow-up visits. The next part of the study is critical because we need to see how things have changed over the past five years. Some studies offer a "snapshot" of a certain period of time, but this longitudinal study is designed to follow a large number of people over a long period of time. This type of study is what allows researchers to see the

bigger picture of who develops arthritis and which risk factors are important in the development and progression of the disease. This is



*Della Gullatt (right) with Harriet Eldridge (left), a Johnston County Osteoarthritis Project participant.*

why it is important that everyone return for the follow-up visit.

Della Gullatt, who has been with the project for almost seven years, is one of the interviewers who will contact the original participants. She says she is glad to be going back to Kenly where everyone is so warm and friendly. "I met so many nice people in Kenly," she says, "and I'm looking forward to visiting with them again." She is pictured here with one of the participants she interviewed, Harriet Eldridge. Ms. Eldridge says that she not only learned about arthritis during the study, but about her high blood pressure as well. Since her clinic visit, she has kept her hypertension under control by taking her medication regularly.

## Genetics Study: Family Recruitment Begins

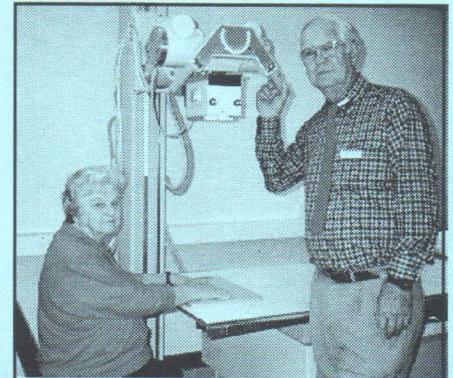
Larry Smith and his sister Betty Smith are both Benson participants in the *Johnston County Osteoarthritis Project*. Recently, they have decided to sign up for another of our studies on arthritis. This study is also about osteoarthritis and focuses on the kind that runs in families, generalized osteoarthritis. The study is called the Genetics of Generalized Osteoarthritis (GOGO). The goal of this study is to find the genetic factors responsible for passing the arthritis on through generations of a family. Discovering these genes could help us to understand the cause and find new ways to treat and even prevent the disease.

Betty Smith remembers her mother's hands having the typical features of hardened, swollen

knots with pain and stiffness in the joints of her fingers. Now she has noticed that her own fingers are developing these same knots. Larry noticed the knots on his fingers several years ago when they began to ache. Considering his young son, he understands the importance of the study and says he thinks "it is a very good thing to volunteer for."

As recent *Johnston County Osteoarthritis Project* participants, Larry and Betty will not need additional x-rays taken of their hips and knees. They will simply have hand x-rays and a brief exam and complete a questionnaire. They will also give a small amount of blood in order to provide the lab with the DNA needed to do genetic testing. The

entire study is free and open to anyone with this specific type of hand arthritis, not just *Johnston County Osteoarthritis Project* participants. Someone who has not already been in the study would also have knee and hip x-rays .



Larry Smith, working for a Benson clinic, x-rays his sister's hands for this important genetics study.

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## Congressman Bob Etheridge visits Rural Health Research

On October 14, 1997, United States Congressman Bob Etheridge came to the Rural Health Research office to hear Dr. Joanne Jordan speak about the *Johnston County Osteoarthritis Project*. Many Johnston County residents were present at this meeting. Dr. Jordan told the group about the importance of the study which is designed to gain insight into what causes osteoarthritis, how to prevent it from developing or progressing, and how best to help those who already have it. She also discussed some preliminary findings from the study about risk factors for arthri-

tis. This study has shown us that arthritis is more common than previously thought. The study is



From left, Dr. Joanne Jordan, Congressman Bob Etheridge, State Senator Allen Wellons, and Benson interviewer Helen Smith.

the only one of its kind and is designed to study osteoarthritis in African-Americans as well as Caucasians. Some differences have been found in how it affects the two groups. For example, obesity, which has been linked to osteoarthritis, appears to be a stronger risk factor in African-Americans than Caucasians.

Congressman Etheridge acknowledged the importance of our on-going research. After the talk, he had a chance to speak with everyone in attendance. We really appreciate the Congressman and all of our guests for being so supportive of this project.

## Project Update (Continued)

*(Continued from page 1)*

the word about the study and increase awareness of the impact of arthritis in the county. Janice Woodard, our project director and director of Rural Health Research, attended once again the Washington Issues Seminar in Washington, D.C. Our local and national Senators and Representatives have taken notice of the project. We hosted a project update for local leaders and Congressman Bob Etheridge in October 1997 (see inside, p 3).

1997 also saw the retirement of our beloved Dr. John Fryer, who has been with us as co-principal investigator and statisti-

cian for the project, since it began in 1990. Dr. Fryer was a wonderful researcher, mentor, and friend to us all. He traveled every road in the county with Wilma Howard to help recruit participants for the study. He was truly devoted to the project and to the citizens of Johnston County.

We begin 1998 with anticipation, hope, and much promise. We look forward to continuing the genetics study and seeing all of you again as our first follow-up visits begin in Kenly this summer. Progress is being made every day. This is truly a time to be excited about research in osteoarthritis!

### May is National Arthritis Awareness Month

- Osteoarthritis affects about 16 million Americans
- Women are more often affected than men
- Knee osteoarthritis can be as disabling as any cardiovascular disease except stroke
- Research has shown that osteoarthritis is not an inevitable part of aging

Arthritis Foundation home page. For more information on arthritis see <http://www.arthritis.org>

#### Please stay involved by:

- Giving us your change of address
- Returning for your follow-up visit

## Genetics Study (Continued)

*(Continued from page 3)*

Participants are needed for this important new study. In order to qualify for the study you must have at least one close relative with the same type of hand arthritis who can also participate. Brothers and sisters both with



*A picture of osteoarthritis affecting the hand - notice how the joints near the fingernail are the most enlarged.*

and without arthritis are especially needed. If you think that you may have this type of arthritis, please ask your brothers and sisters to participate. For more information about the study, please call **Rural Health Research** at (919) 934-1295.

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Osteoarthritis Project

Johnston County



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