Fresh ideas

Pennington’s director to hand over leadership, return to research

By LAURIE SMITH ANDERSON

Pennington Biomedical Research Center has come a long way, and after 35 years as executive director, Dr. George Bray is ready to hand over the reins and return to the laboratory.

Dr. Bruce Bouchard, a renowned scientist in the field of obesity research, assumes the leadership position at Pennington in early August. He said he’s "very excited to take on this new role, but also very grateful to Dr. Bray for all he has done in the past 35 years."

Pennington, which is one of the nation's leading centers for obesity research, is known for its cutting-edge research and academic excellence. With research centers on campus, Pennington has been able to attract top scientists from around the world.

Bouchard wants center at top of world's nutrition research

By LAURIE SMITH ANDERSON

Claude Bouchard has an opportunity to lead Pennington Biomedical Research Center when he becomes executive director — "to become the preeminent world leader in nutrition research."" Pennington has already been cited as one of the most important research centers in America". Bouchard said. The challenge will be to continue that growth and pursue new opportunities.

Pennington, a professor of Nutrition at Laval University in Quebec, Canada, has served as chairman of a Pennington advisory panel for several years and has visited the campus on several occasions.

The major challenge for Bouchard will be to "effectively manage the center's budget, applied and clinical research priorities for the next five years and updating the plan annually."

Pennington will continue to need strong support from the Pennington Foundation, the community and its own foundation, he said, adding that the Pennington family "is very much a part of the scientific legacy". The center's reputation also rests on the backs of its administrators, scientists, and students.

What is Pennington, Bouchard plans to continue his work on the genetic and molecular bases of obesity, which has been funded primarily by the National Institutes of Health and the American Heart Association.

One of the goals of Bouchard's research is to identify genetic markers that might eventually be used to develop new drugs. Bouchard also plans to continue his research on the use of the genomics approach to understand the role of obesity in the development of diabetes and cardiovascular disease.
Fatemeh Ramezanazadeh analyzes the nutritional content of a meal in the Pennington Center's food analysis laboratory.

Bray

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1C

needs to look at expanding its base — possibly through other philanthropic endowments.

"Mr. Pennington (the late C.B. "Doc" Pennington) started everything, but if we're going to continue to grow in excellence, we need to find other sources."

With competition growing from other institutions now doing nutrition research, Pennington needs to pinpoint its niche or area of expertise to specialize in, he said. Bray identified areas of focus during the center's first decade; it will be up to Bouchard to do that for the next 10 years, he said.

The overall mission of Pennington is "to promote healthier lives through nutrition and preventive medicine."

Bray, an endocrinologist with an international reputation for his research in nutrition, obesity and diabetes, designated four areas of concentration at Pennington. They included: new approaches to reducing cholesterol and dietary fat, the use of molecular biology to study disease mechanisms and develop tools for controlling diabetes, the influence of diet on brain function, and the way obesity and body fat distribution contribute to disease.

With Bray's return to research full time, he has grants from NIH that go to the year 2006 and another one pending that could last until 2009 — "two more five-year terms at Pennington," he laughed.

Two of his grants are for laboratory studies of how the brain controls feeding. Two others are for clinical trials where Pennington is one of several centers where people are enrolled in studies to determine how to delay and/or prevent diabetes, and a look at the effects of dietary patterns on blood pressure.

Bray's leadership was praised by others who have worked with him over the years, John W. Barton Sr., who serves on the board that hired both Bray and Bouchard, said the recruiting process was much easier this time around because of the foundation Bray laid.

Twelve years ago, Pennington had a beautiful building, but no scientists or track record in nutrition research, he said. "Over the last 10 years, Dr. Bray has brought in outstanding scientists who attracted grants and contracts to support the facility. More importantly, he has established a high standard of scientific excellence."

"I was struck by how far Pennington has come when comparing the search process we conducted 12 years ago to this most recent search for Dr. Bray's successor. Last time, we had to convince potential candidates that this was a great opportunity. This time, the center sold itself. The finalists for the position were all outstanding. I am convinced that a major reason Dr. Bouchard was willing to leave a successful research program in Canada is because of Dr. Bray's hard work and the quality of the program he has established," Barton said.

"He (Bray) brought Pennington from a virtually unknown entity to an internationally renowned research center," said Dr. Allen Copping, former LSU System president and now executive director of the Pennington Medical Foundation. "This is one of the finest facilities anywhere and, in the next 10 years, it's going to explode."

David York, Pennington's director of basic research, and his colleagues study the effects of a protein called entero-statin discovered by their lab in 1993 that reduces appetite for dietary fat in laboratory animals.