Committee makes recommendations for accomplishing quieter, safer spring weekend

BY RICHARD VEILLEUX

The Board of Trustees last week received a series of recommendations they hope will accelerate the positive momentum established in recent years and lead to a more subdued Spring Weekend. The recommendations were offered by the Board's Student Life Committee, chaired by Trustee Louise Bailey. They include reducing or eliminating the presence of non-UConn students from campus during the weekend; scheduling exams or projects for that Friday; making landlords and students responsible for any costs their actions – or inaction – cause; and curtailing any attempts by off-campus residents to expand the event inaction – cause; and curtailing any attempts by off-campus residents to expand the event

The committee recommends beginning the process of eliminating, in partnership with local property owners, one of the three traditional but unsanctioned parties – the Thursday night kick-off at Carriage House Apartments about one mile from campus.

The committee was appointed by Dr. John Rowe, chairman of the Board of Trustees, last June. Since then, the committee has heard from dozens of individuals, including students, town and University officials, Mansfield residents, and public safety officials. They also conducted an extensive survey, to which nearly 5,400 people responded.

Since 1998, when the weekend reached its nadir, a combination of increased non-alcoholic activities and enforcement has led to fewer arrests, smaller crowds, and less rowdy behavior. Since 2004, 55 initiatives have been launched in an attempt to scale back the unsanctioned activities; 22 of those initiatives have remained in place since 2005.

“One of the consistent themes emerging from the review is the sense of pride and accomplishment people from the student body to the Town of Mansfield feel regarding efforts they have already taken to ameliorate concerns,” the report states. “There is also a common feeling that more can and needs to be done. Efforts in prevention, education, enforcement, and management are reflected in the recommendations. We propose that the constituencies who shared their concern unite in a focused effort to act on these recommendations.”

see CORE task force page 2

see Spring weekend page 6
Former professor of home economics Louise Teich Johnson dies at 95

Former professor and administrator Louise Teich Johnson died Feb. 2. She was 95.

Johnson, who lived in Storrs, graduated from the University of Connecticut with a bachelor’s degree in 1936 and a master’s degree in the early 1950s. She was at the University for more than 25 years, where she taught courses in clothing and fashion and textiles. She was also an administrator in the School of Home Economics, which became the School of Family Studies.

Over the years Johnson received many honors for her significant contributions to the University. She was given a Special Recognition Award from the School of Family Studies, and the School’s Alumni Society honored her with its Distinguished Service Award. She also received the University Service Award from the Alumni Association.

In 1990, UConn recognized her lifetime of contributions by awarding her its highest honor, the University Medal, jointly with her husband, the late Reuben B. John- son ‘36, a former dean and alumni director of the University.

Johnson’s father, Frederic C. Teich, was the architect of more than 20 buildings on the UConn campus, including the Wilbur Cross Building, the Raf tick Holmes School of Agriculture complex, the Jorgensen Center for the Performing Arts, the original Student Union building, and the Greer Field House. She also designed the house in which his daughter lived for more than 50 years.

Irene Brown, associate professor emerita of human development and family studies, says Johnson “lived and breathed the University. She was instrumental in starting the Family Studies Alumni Society. I remember wonderful meetings in her living room. She was welcoming and inspiring.”

Brown adds that Johnson enjoyed attending the annual scholarship event in memory of her father: “She always wanted students to be recognized for their creative interests.”

Johnson was a member of Kappa Alpha Theta, the American Association of University Women, the Women’s Club of Storrs, the Storrs Congregational Church, the Botelho Family Association and the Parish Piecers, a quilting group.

She was preceded by her husband, to whom she was mar- ried for more than 50 years, and a daughter. She is survived by her son, Reuben, four grandchildren, and two great grandchildren.

A service for the remembrance and celebration of her life will be held on Feb. 21 at 2 p.m. at the Storrs Congregational Church.

Nominations for this award should be submitted to the UConn Foundation Inc., Frederic C. Teich Award, payable to the UConn Foundation Inc., with The Frederic C. Teich Award (30112) in the memo line, and sent to the UConn Foundation, 2390 Alumni Drive, Unit 3206, Storrs, CT 06269-3206.

Nominations sought for awards recognizing women of color

The Women’s Center is calling for assistance in recognizing and honoring women of color who have made a significant contribu- tion to the University. Candidates may be nominated for excellence based on qualities and achievements and as deter- mined through their work with others. Nominations should include evidence based on but not limited to service and/or contribu- tions to the University, academic or career achievements, community service, and commitment to enhancing quality of life and/or serving as a role model for women of color.

Candidates must have been employed at the University for at least 12 months. Students are not eligible for this award.

The nomination form is available at http://www.womenscenter.uconn.edu/WOC2009.pdf. The form should be printed and mailed to Kathy Fischer, Women’s Center, U-3118, Storrs, CT 06269-3118.

The deadline for nominations is Feb. 20.
Stem cell scientist, cloning pioneer  
Jerry Yang died at 49

BY DAVID BAUMAN

Xiaozhang Yang, widely known as Jerry, a stem cell scientist, cloning pioneer, professor of animal science, and director of UConn’s Center for Regenerative Biology, died on Feb. 5 after a long battle with cancer. He was 49.

Internationally recognized for his research in animal embryo transfer and embryo biotechnology, Yang joined the faculty at UConn in 1990. He was offered a position as an assistant professor of animal science in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resource and was appointed director of the University’s new Center for Regenerative Biology with five new faculty, charged with investigating areas of basic science in the growing field of regenerative biology and medicine.

Yang laid the groundwork for an attempt to clone a human embryo, in the hope of creating embryonic stem cells that are an exact match of patients’ vision. This is that stem cells derived from a patient’s own cells would enable doctors to treat a host of diseases, ranging from cancer to Parkinson’s disease and diabetes.

A strong advocate of stem cell research, Yang was appointed to the state Stem Cell Research Advisory Committee, established following passage of the Stem Cell Investment Act in 2005. The legislation made Connecticut the third state in the nation to provide public funding in support of embryonic and human adult stem cell research.

His efforts helped promote understanding about the use of cloning, as therapies in clinical settings and put UConn on the leading edge of stem cell science. His battle with cancer forced him to take medical leave in 2007.

“Jerry was an inspiration to us all, both personally and professionally,” says Dr. David Goldhamer, associate professor of molecular and cell biology and interim director of the Center for Regenerative Biology. “I have never known anyone to fight so hard, while maintaining such optimism and hope for the future.”

“Jerry’s a tremendous personal loss for all who knew him, and we can all learn from his sheer determination and love of life,” Goldhamer adds. “The scientific community owes him an immense debt of gratitude for his pioneering work and passionate advocacy of stem cell research.”

Yang was survived by his wife, Xinchun (Cindy) Tian, an associate professor of animal science at UConn; their son, Andrew; and their daughters, Wuting and Fangrong, three brothers and a sister.

A public memorial service will be held on Friday, Feb. 20, at 10 a.m. at the Rome Community Ballroom.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made in memory of Yang for a purpose to be designated by his family. Please make checks payable to The UConn Foundation Inc., with “in honor of Dr. Jerry Yang” in the memo line, and send to the UConn Foundation, 2390 Alumni Drive U-3206, Storrs, CT 06269-3206.

Author Sally Rogers sings from her book Earthsong at the UConn Co-op on Feb. 7, as part of Connecticut Loves to Read Day.

HIV/AIDS intervention program selected as one of top in nation

BY COLIN PETITJEAN

An HIV/AIDS prevention program developed by researchers at the Center for Health, Intervention and Prevention (CHP) has been selected as one of the country’s top HIV/AIDS interventions by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"Options" was developed by a team led by Jeffrey Fisher, a professor of social psychology in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and director of CHP. The Options intervention focuses on prevention with positives. It trains clinicians to talk with HIV-positive patients about reducing their risky sexual and drug use behavior, using behavior change theory and motivational interviewing techniques.

The clinicians work collaboratively with patients in assessing their risky behaviors and willingness to change. Together, clinician and patient then develop strategies for practicing safer behaviors and set future goals that are written out in a “prescription” for safer sex or drug use.

Interventions that work

Officials at the CDC selected Options as one of eight interventions added this year to the 2008 Compendium of Evidence-Based HIV Prevention Interventions. The CDC publishes the compendium annually to highlight programs that have been scientifically proven to reduce HIV or STD-related risk behaviors or promote safer behaviors. The compendium is a source of information that informs state and local HIV prevention programs about what works for preventing HIV infections. It includes a total of 57 interventions.

Fisher says the Options model was developed, implemented, and evaluated by Fisher in the late 1990s in collaboration with his brother, Bill Fisher, a professor at the University of Western Ontario; Dr. Gerald Friedland, a professor and infectious disease doctor at Yale University; Deborah Cornman, a clinical psychologist and associate director of CHP; and K. Rivet Amico, an assistant research professor in clinical psychology and CHP affiliate.

In a study conducted between October 2000 and August 2003 involving 497 HIV-positive patients recruited from two Connecticut HIV clinics, researchers found risk behavior by HIV-positive patients decreased significantly among those participating in the Options program, while it increased for those not receiving the intervention.

With funding from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration, Options was expanded successfully to 15 healthcare facilities throughout the country. In the State of New York, all healthcare facilities that receive Ryan White funding must provide HIV prevention counseling to HIV-positive patients, and Options is the recommended intervention.

Options is also being implemented in eight HIV clinics in South Africa, and in military hospitals in Mozambique and Uganda.

CHP media relations specialist Beth Kraue contributed to this article.
The nation’s health care system will face significant challenges in the coming decades, as the number of individuals living with cancer rises dramatically along with the aging of the baby boomers, according to Keith Bellizzi, assistant professor of human development and family studies in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Understanding the special needs of older adults with cancer and how the disease and related treatment impacts their physical, emotional, and social health is an area that deserves immediate exploration, he says.

The issues surrounding cancer and aging are garnering international attention. Bellizzi recently served as guest editor for a special supplement of the journal Cancer that addressed the topic. The supplement, Aging in the Context of Cancer: Policy, Practice, and Controversies from Behavioral Medicine, was released in December.

Evidence-based practice

In the supplement, Bellizzi, along with his colleague Thomas Blank, a professor of human development and family studies, and more than a dozen fellow research- ers from across the country, say there is an urgent need for clear, evidence-based practice guidelines to address the needs of older adults, and others who provide short- and long-term care management to older adults with cancer.

Only with more immediate re- search will appropriate prevention efforts, screening, treatment ap- proaches, post-treatment survivor- ship, and end of life care be put in place to serve this rapidly growing population, the supplement says.

The single greatest risk factor for cancer is age. More than 60 percent of all malignant cancer diagnoses are in people age 65 or older. Currently, there are an estimated 6.5 million adults age 65 or older in the U.S. who have had cancer.

That number is expected to rise as the country’s baby boomer population ages and the number of men and women age 65 and older – currently about 36.8 million – doubles by the year 2030.

Due to advances in medical science, cancer is no longer a uniformly fatal illness. Approximately 43 percent of older cancer survivors are expected to live for 10 years or more, and about 17 percent will survive for 20 years or more after their initial diagnosis, according to recent estimates.

Need for research

“The coalescence of three factors has the potential to create one of the biggest public health problems our country has faced in decades,” says Bellizzi. “These are: the aging of the baby boomers, the age-sensitive nature of cancer, and the increased survival rates for those diagnosed with cancer.”

He says there is growing consensus that researchers and clinicians need to take a multidis- ciplinary approach, incorporating perspectives from geriatrics, oncology, behavioral medicine, and public health to ensure the best possible care.

Bellizzi cites two recent reports that warn of a looming shortage of older oncologists and geriatricians and a lack of new specialists to replace them.

“Two pressing questions that need to be addressed are: 1) Who and how will we care for the growing population of older individuals with cancer, many of whom will also have competing health condi- tions, and 2) what are the unique physical, mental, and social issues they face?” Bellizzi says. “Regrettably, research has not kept pace with this growing population.”

Critical issues

Obstacles to improving care exist at all points along the cancer care continuum, Bellizzi says. Some critical issues facing the country’s growing population of older cancer survivors are:

• Prevention – There is a preva- lent belief in the medical commu- nity and among the general public that since many older people suffer from chronic disease, the focus should be on illness management rather than prevention.

• Screening – In general, older adults are less likely to be screened for cancer and more likely to re- ceive incomplete diagnostic work- ups. Future research should focus on developing or updating screen- ing guidelines for older adults, based on clinical trials that include older adults; decreasing barriers to screening when it is found to be beneficial; and leveraging aging orga- nizations to enhance older adults’ participation in screening trials.

• Treatment – Older adults are less likely to receive optimal doses of chemotherapy compared with younger patients, due to toxici- ties and perceived complications. Use of a Comprehensive Geriatric Assessment is recommended, to determine which older cancer pa- tients can benefit from treatment and which patients may benefit more from palliative care.

• Survivorship – Trying to disentangle the effects of cancer and its treatment from compet- ing health conditions like cardio- vascular disease, diabetes, and osteoporosis on health outcomes is complex. Some studies suggest that older cancer survivors may do worse physically and psychologically than non-cancer comparison groups. More research is needed.

More research needed to improve care for older adults with cancer

BY COLIN PETITAS

The explosion in the American prison population was a tiny fraction of the nation’s growing population of adults with cancer. Today, that number – currently about 36.8 million – doubles by the year 2030.

Incarceration is also expensive, reflecting in laws, “said Foley. “We’re jailing many people who do not need jailing.”

Foley said prisoners are not treated as human beings, some being packed into small cells four at a time.

This, he said, combined with a lack of adequate support when a sentence concludes, makes reen- tering the world from prison very difficult.

When it comes to sentencing, Foley said, the nation needs to “rethink the idea of using prison promiscuously.”

Duke, the Yale professor, drew a direct connection between the massive prison population and the “war on drugs,” which began in the early 1970s when the prison population was a tiny fraction of today’s.

He said “it is not the use of drugs that causes crime, it’s the prohib- ition.” The risks posed to drug dealers and users by aggressive law enforcement increases the cost of drugs, and the high cost leads ad- ducts to go to great lengths to obtain drugs, including committing theft and property crimes, he said.

He took particular aim at laws relating to marijuana.

Duke said it is unheard of to overdose on marijuana, and violence is not typically associated with its use. “It is mindless for us to put people in jail for using mari- juana,” he said.

When it comes to drug offend- ers, Duke pointed to several stud- ies that show treatment is effective for many people in prison for drug-related crimes. There are no studies to the contrary, he added.

Reducing recidivism

Carbone, of the judicial depart- ment, agreed that treatment is an effective option that reduces rates of recidivism. And, he added, it is ultimately less expensive than incarceration.

Why, then, is there more emphasis on incarceration than on treatment for drug offenders? And why did government move to change laws and programs, lead- ing to an explosion in the prison population?

Duke suggested public attitudes have something to do with it. He said he detected a change in the American mindset, beginning in the early 1980’s, as the public de- manded a tougher stand on crime and harsher sentences for offend- ers. This led state legislatures and Congress to enact tougher penal- ties and longer sentences, and reduce judicial discretion.

Other panels during the day examined social causes and impli- cations, and prisoners’ rights and system reform.

School of Law panel discusses causes of prison overcrowding

BY MICHAEL KIRK

In 1977, Connecticut had roughly 4,000 of its citizens incarcerated. Today that number is about 19,000. And nationwide, more than 2.3 million people are in prison, more than in any other nation in the world, including Russia and China.

The explosion in the American prison population was a tiny fraction of the nation’s growing population of adults with cancer. Today, that number – currently about 36.8 million – doubles by the year 2030.

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Biomaterials engineer receives state award for innovation

By Christ DeFrancesco

Liisa Kuhn’s biomaterials engineering research could ultimately lead to tissue regeneration or a new cancer treatment, perhaps even a cure.

Her work may not be used in the clinic quite yet, but its promise impressed the Connecticut Technology Council enough to name her a 2009 Women of Innovation Award winner.

Kuhn, an assistant professor in the Center for Biomaterials and Regenerative Medicine at the UConn Health Center, was one of 10 winners among 52 finalists, all considered “innovators, role models, and leaders in the technology, science, and engineering fields” by the Connecticut Technology Council, the state’s industry association for the technology sector.

Kuhn took top honors in the Academic Innovation and Leadership category.

“Dr. Liisa Kuhn brings innovation to the academic environment through the most effective of means, her own example,” wrote Center for Biomaterials director Jonathan Goldberg in his nomination. “Dr. Kuhn is actively sought by students as a mentor and by faculty as a research collaborator. As evidenced by her numerous students and funded grants, she brings an innovative perspective on how materials engineering can address a wide range of clinical problems.”

Kuhn worked in industry before joining the Health Center faculty, and brings her industrial innovation experience to the classroom.

Goldberg says, “Liisa’s work is a prime example of how we bring real life problems and examples to the classroom, and translate research back to real life solutions.”

The seminar series promotes debate on foreign policy issues

By Scott Brinckerhoff

Since 1985, the Department of History has been hosting seminars on foreign policy that frequently ignite passions and challenge assumptions about events both major and minor throughout modern history.

Whether the subject is the Cold War, World War II, Middle East disputes, or the U.S. occupation of Haiti early in the last century, the speakers have shown time and again that they are quite comfortable rocking conventional wisdom.

“We choose people whose work we have read, or whom we have heard speak on another occasion, and most of the choices have been terrific,” says Jarry Clifford, a professor of political science in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences who has been associated with the program since it began.

Some guests — such as Melvyn Leffler, the Edward Stettinius Professor of History, Costigliola, a professor of history in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences who coordinates the series. “The idea is to provide students and faculty with a perspective from outside the University. For example, our speaker last month was from Australia.”

Barbara Keys of the University of Melbourne spoke in January on the successes and failures of the international campaign to abolish torture, 1967-1984, in a talk titled “Making Torture as Unthinkable as Slavery.”

In the past,” adds Costigliola, “we’ve taken up such issues as the role of race in history, American involvement in the Philippines, and the war in Vietnam.”

Stimulating debate

The speakers often present a perspective that is fresh and thought-provoking.

Clifford recalls a talk several years ago by Kristin Hoganson, then an assistant professor at Harvard. She identified gender politics, rather than economics, as one of the prime motives for the United States’ decision to go to war with Spain and the Philippines at the threshold of the 20th century.

“It was a fantastic talk,” says Clifford. “She used feminist theories to look at American foreign relations from a new perspective. She examined the language of the time, and showed a political cartoon questioning President McKinley’s ‘backbone’ and in effect, his virility.”

The debate that follows the presentation may take a lively turn.

For example, in his presentation on the Cold War, Leffler argued that ideological inflexibility on both sides, memories of war, especially on the Soviet side, and a belief by each side that its political system was superior and would ultimately triumph, were key impediments to ending the Cold War. A polite but heated debate ensued.

Mike Neagle, a Ph.D. student in history who has been attending the foreign policy seminar series for the past five years, says the lectures provide a good atmosphere for considering provocative issues.

“Professor Leffler’s lecture was the 92nd in the series, and like the others I’ve attended, his comments helped us do”

UConn had six finalists for this year’s Women of Innovation Awards: Amy Howell, professor of chemistry, also in the Academic Innovation and Leadership category; Jun-Hong Cui, associate professor of computer science and engineering, and Susan G. Kuhn, associate professor of physics, were finalists for the Research Innovation and Leadership Award; Donna Cyr, the Health Center’s director of technology licensing, was a finalist for the Large Business Innovation and Leadership Award, and Emily Neumann, who graduated with a bachelor’s in English and journalism last year, was in the Colle-gion Innovation and Leadership category.
Nominations sought for environmental leadership awards

Nominations are being sought for the Environmental Leadership Awards. These awards recognize students, faculty, and staff for contributions to environmental awareness and promotion of progress in the University’s ‘green’ efforts. Guidelines and nomination forms are available on the web at http://www.ecohuskys.uconn.edu/leadershipaward.html The nomination deadline is March 1.
Events


Strategies. 2 p.m., Graduate Business Learning Center, Constitution Plaza, Hartford.

Note: Items for the weekly Advance Calendar are downloaded from the University’s online Events Calendar. Please enter your Calendar items at: http://events.uconn.edu/ Items must be in the database by 4 p.m. on Monday for inclusion in the issue published the following Monday.

Note: The next Calendar will include events taking place from Monday, Feb. 23 through Monday, Mar. 2. Those items must be in the database by 4 p.m. on Tuesday, Feb. 17. If you need special accommodations to participate in events, call 860-486-2943 (stairs), or 860-487-3563 (Farrington), or 860-570-5310 (Law School).

Libraries

Homer Babbidge Library. Monday-Thursday, 7:30 a.m.-2 a.m., Friday, 7:30 a.m.-12 p.m., Saturday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Sunday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; closed Monday. Dodd Center. Monday-Thursday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Friday, noon-4 p.m.; closed Sunday. Pharmacy Library. Monday-Thursday, 8:30 a.m.-10 p.m.; Friday, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m.; Saturday, noon-5 p.m.; Sunday, noon-5 p.m. Health Center Library. Monday-Thursday, 7 a.m.-11 p.m., Friday, 7 a.m.-7 p.m., Saturday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Sunday, noon-10 p.m. Law Library. Monday-Thursday, 8 a.m.-11 p.m., Friday, 8 a.m.-10 p.m.; Saturday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Sunday, 1-9 p.m. Avery Point Campus Library. Monday-Thursday, 8:30 a.m.-7 p.m.; Friday, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m.; closed weekends.

Greater Hartford Campus Library. Monday-Thursday, 9 a.m.-9 p.m.; Friday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Stamford Campus Library. Monday-Thursday, 8 a.m.-8 p.m.; Friday, 8:30 a.m.-4 p.m.; Saturday, 11 a.m.-4 p.m.; closed Sunday. Torrington Campus Library. Monday-Thursday, 9:30 a.m.-6:30 p.m.; Friday, 9 a.m.-1 p.m.; closed weekends.

Waterbury Campus Library. Monday-Thursday, 8 a.m.-7:30 p.m.; Friday, 8 a.m.-1:30 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m.-12:30 p.m.; closed weekends.

University ITS

Help Desk: Call 860-486-6057, Monday-Friday, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m.

Ph.D. Defense

Thursday, 2/19 – Physiology & Neurobiology. Molecular and Cellular Regulation of Neurogenic Cell Proliferation. A study on the role of the Cytokines and Adhesion Molecules. By Yoonsung Chuang. 3 p.m., Room 100, University Technology Building.

Poetry Reading

Sunday, 2/22 – Student Recital. Nathan Rodriguez, baritone, and Rachel Postovoit, mezzo soprano, 3 p.m., von der Mehden Recital Hall. Free admission.

Film

Tuesday, 2/17 – Film Screening and Discussion. Kick Like a Girl. Lead Like a Woman, followed by discussion led by Jenny Mackenzie, documentary filmmaker. 7 p.m., Student Union Theatre. Free admission.

Saturday, 2/21 – Women’s Lacrosse vs. Vermont. 1 p.m., Freitas Ice Forum.

Saturday, 2/21 – Men’s Basketball vs. South Florida. 2 p.m., XL Center, Hartford.

Saturday, 2/21 – Men’s Ice Hockey vs. New Hampshire. 1 p.m., Freitas Ice Forum.

Friday, 2/20 – Art Films. YouTube Film Festival about the Dominican Republic. 7 p.m., Freitas Ice Forum.

Saturday, 2/22 – Women’s Basketball vs. Notre Dame Dames. 2 p.m., XL Center, Hartford.

Potpourri

Tuesday, 2/17 – UConn OAPA Workshop. “Something’s Happening,” workshop on promoting a civil work environment. 9 a.m., Rome Commons Ballroom. For more information call Cara Workman, 848-404-477 or 860-487-0880. Tuesday, 2/17 – Author Event. Making Freedom: The Extraordinary Story of Venture Smith. 8 p.m., York Hall, Student Union Theatre. Free admission.

Saturday, 2/21 – Darwin Day. Tales and Talk about the Power of Biology, with Susan Campbell, Hartford Courant reporter and columnist. 6:30 p.m., UConn Co-op.

Thursday, 2/19 – Author Event. Day of Remembrance, by Robert Hayashi, Amherst College. 4 p.m., Student Union Theatre. Free admission.


Sunday, 2/22 – Author Event. President’s Day Tea with Barbara McClintock, author. Admission fee $5. 3 p.m., UConn Co-op.
Christopher Perkins, lab director at the Center for Environmental Sciences and Engineering, and Sylvain De Guise, an associate professor of pathobiology in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, discovered that popular disinfectants using nanosilver particles could affect some people’s health. Germicidal properties Silver has strong germicidal properties, making it ideally suited for commercial products where germs are not desired. Nanosilver particles can be found in toothpastes, past shampoos, cosmetics, cutting boards, food containers, and baby bottles. They are also used in the lining of certain medical devices, room deodorizers, inks, softeners, brass, ATM buttons, and even on the handrails of buses. The ability of nanosilver particles to attack germs is very well known. But it is what happens when these particles break free and enter the body that concerned UConn researchers the most. Through recent laboratory testing, Perkins and De Guise discovered that the ingestion and inhalation of minute amounts of these silver particles can affect human cells, and may diminish the functioning of the immune system in some individuals. Extremely small concentrations of nanosilver particles, around 10 nanometers in diameter, were shown to slow down the secretion of cytokines. Cytokines are a category of signaling molecules that are used extensively in cellular communication. Such cytokine suppression, says Perkins, indicates “your immune system is not operating at peak capacity.” Larger silver particles exhibited almost no effect on cytokines, regardless of their concentrations.

“The major finding is that we are seeing effects at concentrations much lower than those usually studied in conventional toxicology,” says De Guise, the primary investigator for the project. “This dismisses the conventional wisdom in toxicology that ‘dilution is how we do it.’” Immune system response Part of Perkins’ and De Guise’s research focused on the ability of immune system cells to consume foreign bodies for disposal after exposure to nanosilver. They compared the activity of cells that were exposed to nanosilver particles for three hours to cells that received no exposure. The cells that had been exposed to nanosilver demonstrated a dramatically increased rate of consumption compared to those that had not been exposed. While this might appear to be good news, it is hard to tell, Perkins says. Immune system cells must be able to clear pathogens from the body. But if they become overly aggressive, they can waste energy and risk accidentally attacking healthy cells. The researchers also measured the abilities of cells encountering nanosilver to release bursts of free radicals – chemically reactive molecular fragments meant to damage or kill invading germs or sick cells that need disposal. Cells exposed to the smaller nanosilver particles showed increased bursts. That also could be cause for concern, Perkins says. “You’ve got all of these free radicals that have to go somewhere,” Perkins says. “And they’re pretty nonspecific in what they target, which means they could kill healthy cells as well as bacteria or other pathogens.” So far, the researchers’ findings have been limited to test tubes in the laboratory. They stress that the potential impact of nanosilver particles on human beings will only be understood through additional testing. In some cases, the disinfectant capabilities of nanosilver particles may outweigh the immune system risk in individuals who are very sick. But the immune system effects found in the lab, they say, are of enough concern to warrant further study. “One of the next steps is to assess the concentrations of nanosilver in people’s tissues following natural exposure to common products,” says De Guise, “and assess whether we could use that research to inform our public health strategies.”