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DAILY HOME PAGE

FRONT PAGE

NEWS

SPORTS

OPINIONS

INTERMISSION

INNOVATION

PHOTO GALLERY

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ADVERTISING

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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SUBSCRIPTIONS

PHOTO REPRINTS

ARCHIVES

CONTACT

Advertisements

Center fights Hepatitis B in Asians

By [LESLIE GEORGATOS](#)

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Tucked away in the basement of the Boswell building of Stanford's Medical Center is the Asian Liver Center (ALC), where 20 dedicated interns and five staff launched their international fight against the "silent killer," Hepatitis B, among Asian Americans.

"Although a vaccine for Hepatitis B has existed for over 20 years, the disease still kills one million people a year, and infects approximately 10 percent of Asian-Americans," said Eric Sue, special projects coordinator for the ALC. "Every day, three times more people die from Hepatitis B than the entire SARS outbreak. Ten times more people live with Hepatitis B than with HIV. The disease has not received the national attention it deserves."

Founded in 1996, the Asian Liver Center is the only non-profit in the United States dedicated to fighting the prevalence of Hepatitis B and liver cancer in Asians and Asian Americans. The Center began when founder and former liver transplant surgeon Samuel So walked through the streets of San Francisco with his secretary, handing out brochures to passersby. It grew to encompass liver cancer research, a clinical program where patients may be tested for Hepatitis B and a thriving outreach branch that involves Stanford students in its efforts to educate the public about Hepatitis B.

"Stanford student interns are actually making an important impact in this global fight," said Sue. "There is a real opportunity right here at Stanford to contribute to improving the health of the world."

The Center's flagship program is the Jade Ribbon Campaign, launched in 2001. The culturally-targeted multimedia campaign educates Asians and Asian Americans about the importance of getting tests and vaccinations for Hepatitis B. Though it began locally, the program spread to other

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California cities, expanded to other states including Washington and Arizona, and recently went international — with budding operations in China and the Philippines. Locally, the Jade Ribbon Campaign involves billboards in San Francisco, prominent advertisements on 100 of the 150 of the city's buses, educational brochures in seven languages and public service announcements in Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean.

“We are trying to eradicate this infection, and we can do it because there is a vaccine,” said Sue. “Essentially, this would help eliminate 80 percent of liver cancer, the third-leading cause of cancer death in the world.”

In addition to the campaign, ALC staff members attend medical conferences and educate practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine on the dangers of Hepatitis B. Annual youth conferences on Stanford Campus help about 140 local students learn how to spread the word about Hepatitis B in their hometowns and schools. The Center also coordinated Three for Life, a collaboration with the San Francisco Department of Public Health to provide low-cost HBV screenings and Hepatitis A and B vaccinations to the San Francisco community.

“I strongly believe that the arrays of projects we work on, like planning for youth conferences, working at booths during community events or giving presentations about Hepatitis B, are making a difference in the community,” said sophomore intern Diana Austria. “I see it every time we discuss Hepatitis B with someone who has never heard of the issue. Often times, they are surprised, curious, and most of all, grateful.”

“As I completed projects and saw them put into action, the great impact of the work that we do in the community and the changes that we are making in promoting this public health issue were very clear,” added former intern and current Outreach Coordinator Sei-Gyung Kim. “There's also an incredible camaraderie in the office. The standards and expectations are high, but there is a very supportive environment that makes the work fun and challenging.”

LIVERight, a 5-kilometer walk/run which took place in April 2005 was one such project. Four hundred and forty participants raised \$51,000 by walking or running through Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. Student volunteers coordinated the project and manned booths with information on Hepatitis B for participants and passersby.

“It was an event defined by hard work, sleepless nights, sacrifice, but above all a love and passion for the cause in mind,” said Austria.

China is the next frontier for the ambitious Liver Center, which brought

the Jade Ribbon Campaign to two Chinese provinces in 2004. The country bears the greatest health burden from Hepatitis B, with 500,000 people dying in China each year due to liver failure.

“The problem with other funding for vaccinations in China was that it only paid for vaccines and syringes,” said Sue. “No money was provided for education or for administrative fees for doctors and nurses to give the vaccine. The vaccines were not being implemented effectively.”

The ALC began its efforts in China by vaccinating 3,500 grade-school children in Sichuan province, then expanded to two cities in the Guang Dong province. There, they vaccinated 100,000 students for free. In addition to vaccines, the ALC provided brochures, posters, and training to the staff of doctors and nurses at each school. Doctors and nurses in China also received financial rewards for effective use of the vaccines.

Interns for 2006-2007 may have the opportunity to go to China and directly oversee implementation of the Center’s plans.

“We’re dedicated to solving this problem not only nationally but globally. It’s truly tragic that one million people continue to die every year from this disease,” So said. “With HIV, there’s no vaccine, so we don’t have all the solutions. But with Hepatitis B, we have had the vaccine for twenty years, so why aren’t we giving it to everyone in the world?”

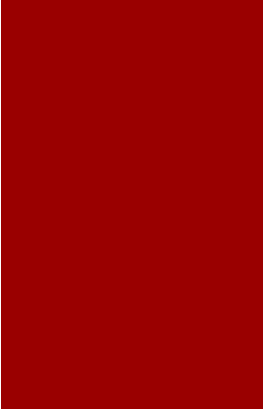
The ALC has dedicated itself to bridging the gap between finding vaccines and using these advances to help people. Along the way, it has struggled through activism and advocacy to give Hepatitis B national media attention — over HIV, SARS or avian flu.

In the United States, Hepatitis B is not a concern of the general population, said Dr. So, citing the one-third percent of the general population infection rate, as compared with a staggering 10 percent rate for Asian Americans.

“You can’t treat the whole population like they are generic Americans,” he said. “If we are going to improve the health of the whole nation, we must pay attention to the health disparities in various populations.”

The Asian Liver Center is currently accepting applications for intern positions as well as for the positions of outreach coordinator and special projects coordinator. Asian language skills are sought, but all students are encouraged to apply.

“Since we emphasize outreach so much, it’s important for everyone to



learn about the effects of Hepatitis B, even if you're not Asian," Gu said.

"It's a chance to stretch yourself, to learn more about important issues, and to invest in a really standout cause that others are not addressing," Kim said. "There are many other non-profits whose interests are divided, or who are focused on raising money, but the ALC is really keenly focused on the people, and our director Dr. So never lets us forget how important that is."