News in Brief

Second-hand Smoke, Urban Pollutants Harm Fetuses

Combined prenatal exposure to second-hand smoke and combustion-related pollutants, at levels currently found in New York City, adversely affects the size and weight of newborns, according to a study by the Columbia Center for Children’s Environmental Health, part of the Mailman School of Public Health. The research involved a sample of 226 infants of non-smoking African American and Dominican women in Washington Heights, Central Harlem and the South Bronx. The study examined the effect of prenatal exposure to two common urban pollutants on fetal growth: second-hand smoke, which contains hundreds of chemicals, and combustion-related pollutants from car, truck, or bus engines, residential heating and power generation.

The actual figures compared those infants whose mothers lived during pregnancy in households where an active smoker was present to those whose mothers did not.

The study found that babies with both pre-natal exposure to second-hand smoke and urban air pollutants had about a 7 percent reduction in birth weight and about a 3 percent reduction in head circumference. The researchers predict that the effect of the study will be published in the April issue of Environmental Health Perspectives.

Horwitz Prize Awarded to Roderick Mackinon

Columbia announced this year’s Louisa Gross Horwitz Prize winner, Roderick Mackinon, a 2003 Nobel Laureate in chemistry and professor of molecular neurobiology and biophysics at Rockefeller University. Mackinon was honored for his studies of ion channels, work that sheds light on how salts (ions) are transported in and out of cells. Mackinon discussed the details and implications of his research at a lecture on Feb. 12 and received his award at ceremonies later that day.

Mackinon’s prize-winning research focuses on the biophysical, structural and functional aspects of ion channels, which control the electrical potential of cell membranes in the natural world. In 1998, Mackinon was able to map out the structure of a specific kind of ion channel—a potassium channel—using X-ray crystallography. This contribution, which was heralded by his peers as a major scientific breakthrough of the 20th century, helped the scientific community gain greater insights into how ions are transmitted, via electrical signals and impulses, through cell membranes—with major ramifications for the basic biological understanding of many diseases.

Awarded annually since its inception in 1967, the Louisa Gross Horwitz Prize is given to recognize exceptional accomplishments in biological and biochemical research.

Zvi Galil Elected to National Academy of Engineering

Zvi Galil, professor of Computer Science and dean of the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science at Columbia University, has been elected to the prestigious National Academy of Engineering (NAE). Each year NAE salutes leaders in engineering for their lifetime dedication to their field and their commitment to advancing the human condition through great engineering achievement and innovative work in engineering and technology education.

“I’m delighted and honored to be elected to the National Academy,” Galil said. Galil is the Julius Camille Levy Professor of Mathematical Methods and Computer Science and the Morris A. and Alma Schapira Professor of Engineering. His main research contributions are in the design and analysis of algorithms, computational complexity and cryptography. Galil joined the Columbia faculty in 1982 and has been dean since 1995. He has written more than 200 scientific papers, edited five books, and has given more than 150 lectures in 20 countries. Galil has served as editor in chief of two journals (The Journal of Algorithms and SIAM Journal on Computing) and as the chief computer science adviser to the United States to the Oxford University Press. Born in Israel, he was educated at Tel Aviv University and received his doctorate from Cornell University.

SOA’s Rirkrit Tiravanija Chosen as Finalist For Guggenheim Prize

Rirkrit Tiravanija, associate professor of professional practice in the School of the Arts’ Visual Arts division, is among six finalists for the Prince Foundation’s 2004 Hugo Boss Prize. One of the premier juried prizes of the contemporary art world, the Hugo Boss Prize is offered every two years by the Guggenheim Foundation.

According to Thomas Krens, director of the Guggenheim Foundation and a juror, “It has given the Guggenheim the opportunity to identify, exhibit, collect and honor the work of extraordinarily talented artists who are actively defining cultural, intellectual, and artistic boundaries around the world.”

The winner of the 2004 Hugo Boss Prize will be announced this fall and will receive $50,000 and an exhibition in early 2005 at New York’s Guggenheim Museum.

Student Lobbyists Visit Albany

On Feb. 10, 18 Columbia University and Barnard College students, along with members of the HEOP offices and the Office of Government and Community Relations, traveled to the state legislature in Albany to participate in an independent schools lobby day. Joining close to 800 students from other private universities and colleges in New York, the students and staff met with 18 assemblmen, senators and their staff to advocate for sparing the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) and STEP program from proposed cuts.

Both TAP and HEOP are financial aid programs for higher education that benefit lower income students from New York State. Many of the Columbia and Barnard students who joined in the lobbying efforts benefit from these need-based aid programs. Under the budget proposed by Governor Pataki for the 2004 fiscal year, TAP, which provides a maximum of $5,000 a year, would be restructured so that a third of the aid would be withheld until a student graduates. The same budget also calls for a 5 percent cut in the funding for HEOP and STEP reducing the HEOP budget to $20.9 million. Nearly 700 undergraduates from Columbia and Barnard receive close to $2 million in TAP-funds. The legislators were very receptive to student concerns and, overall, were enthusiastic that the Assembly and Senate would overturn the Governor’s proposed cuts.

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Quotable Columbian

In a Letter to the Editor in the London’s Financial Times, Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Earth Institute, responded to James Page’s dismissal of coal as an ecologically and economically acceptable resource for the future. “Whether we use coal or Middle East petroleum to meet our energy needs, and whether we use these fuels to produce gasoline or to produce hydrogen as the energy carrier, we will need to introduce new carbon capture-and-disposal technologies to limit decisively the rise of atmospheric carbon due to our use of carbon fuels,” Sachs wrote. “One possible strategy, for example, would be to use coal to produce hydrogen for use in cars and to capture the carbon emissions (and other pollutants from coal combustion) at the hydrogen production plants. There are other promising technological options that should also be considered. With a proper lead time and effort, clean coal (or tar sands and oil shales) with carbon capture and disposal is within economic and technological reach.”

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