

News Digest

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Medicines raise concern

An ingredient in cold medications causes defects in chicken embryos and may harm human fetuses.

OMAHA (AP)—A key ingredient in over-the-counter cough medicines such as Sudafed and Tylenol cold medications was found to cause birth defects and death in chicken embryos. The discovery raises a red flag for pregnant women, researchers said.

"I would be telling my children don't take it, the defects are so severe," said Thomas H. Rosenquist, a developmental biologist and chairman of the University of Nebraska Medical Center's cell biology and anatomy department.

In the two-year study published in January's issue of *Pediatric Research*, Rosenquist and two colleagues gave three different levels of dextromethorphan to chicken embryos developed to the equivalent of three to four weeks of a human embryo.

The lowest level was estimated at what would reach a human embryo if a pregnant woman used one recommended dose of cough medicine, Rosenquist said.

Some embryos were left alone to develop, and others were given only a saline solution.

"There was no level at which there was never a defect," Rosenquist said. "We feel that a single dose is capable of causing a birth defect and that ultimately it could be the cause of a woman to have a miscarriage."

A significant number of the chicken embryos given dextromethorphan developed without brains, or with other birth defects such as spina bifida and cleft palate. At its highest concentration, dextromethorphan killed more than half the embryos and caused birth defects in about 15 percent of the survivors.

The kind of birth defects found occur in the first month of pregnancy, so researchers said women trying to become pregnant also may wish to avoid the drug.

Early embryos of chickens are good indicators of what happens in early development of human embryos, Rosenquist said.

"This dosage, given at that time, will probably cause the same defects," he said. "It could be worse, it could be better, but what we can say for sure is that this raises a red flag."

Dextromethorphan stops coughing by working on a receptor of the

central nervous system, but in embryos it knocks out the receptor, causing the defects, Rosenquist said.

Tests had not been done before on dextromethorphan, Rosenquist said, and the findings indicate a need to look more closely at the drug. Meanwhile, pregnant women should avoid cough medicines, he said.

However, Dick Leavitt, the director of science information at the March of Dimes in White Plains, N.Y., said he had his doubts.

"I think it would take a lot more than chicken embryos to get me concerned," Leavitt said. "Dextromethorphan has been around for a long time, used by people unaware of any suspicions about that."

Robert Felix, a telephone counselor at the University of California at San Diego's Teratogen Information Service, said two studies he had seen did not indicate that pregnant women exposed to dextromethorphan were at risk of birth defects.

A 1977 study looked at 300 women exposed to the drug in their first four months of pregnancy, and a 1985 study looked at 59 women exposed to the drug in their first trimester, Felix said. neither showed any association between dextromethorphan and birth defects.

Glenn chosen for mission to study effects of aging

WASHINGTON (AP) — Thirty-six years after he made history as the first American to orbit the Earth, Sen. John Glenn is being granted an aged astronaut's fondest wish: one more blastoff and fiery ride to where "the view is tremendous."

In October he'll become the oldest man in space.

National Aeronautics and Space Administration officials have decided to grant the 76-year-old Ohio senator and former Marine pilot's long-standing request, convinced by his arguments that he's the right test subject for research into the aging process. NASA called a news conference for Friday to make it official.

His flight aboard the shuttle *Discovery* in October will come more than 36 years after his three-orbit ride aboard the cramped *Friendship 7* capsule on Feb. 20, 1962.

The flight allowed the United States to instantly catch up to the Soviets in the space race and turned Glenn into a worldwide symbol of American know-how and courage.

"It was extremely dangerous at that time," Chris Kraft, flight director for the early flights, recalled Thursday. And the world's reaction was amazing.

"People were standing on the streets in Tokyo, all over the world, awaiting his safe return and listening to the operation as it took place," Kraft said.

Glenn himself talked about how "the view is tremendous" and exulted about the "beautiful blue" horizon during his ride. As his capsule sped back down into Earth's atmosphere in a cascade of sparks and fire, he remarked, "Boy, that was a real fireball of a ride."

Friendship 7 was aloft for four hours, 56 minutes, which at the time seemed an extraordinarily long ride. In recent years, though, Glenn has joked about having such a short time in space and has pressed continually for another shot.

"I'm ready when they say 'go,'" he said.

Portrayed as a hero in the book and subsequent movie "The Right Stuff," Glenn was elected to the Senate in 1974 after a successful

"John is a wonderful candidate because ... he was the first American in orbit."

BUZZ ALDRIN
former astronaut

business career, but is retiring from Congress at the end of 1998.

As news of the NASA decision leaked out, Glenn wasn't confirming anything. But he smiled as he said, "I look forward to discussing this in the future."

Glenn, who will turn 77 in July, has said he has no qualms about putting his body through stresses that might accelerate the aging process.

He will fly on a 10-day research mission aboard *Discovery*, tentatively scheduled to lift off Oct. 8.

Scott Carpenter, 72, who did the famous "God speed, John Glenn" countdown in 1962, said he was thrilled for the man who preceded him in orbit by a mere three months.

"I think it's great. I envy the spot," said Carpenter, who, like Glenn, was one of the select *Mercury 7* astronauts.

Apollo 11's Buzz Aldrin, who turns 68 next week and was the second man to walk on the moon, also said it's a great idea for NASA to send Glenn back into space.

"John is a wonderful candidate because he has a high visibility, he's in great shape and he was the first American in orbit," said Aldrin.

Glenn exercises daily, lifts weights, pilots his own plane and even set a 1996 speed record in his twin-engine Beechcraft Baron.

In making his case to NASA that he would be a good subject for experimentation, Glenn argued that his superb condition, baseline information gathered during his first space training, and records from subsequent yearly physicals provide a unique starting point for a study of osteoporosis and changes in the body's immune system during aging.

Possible lawsuit looms over bill

LB921 would reduce depletion from river basin

By TODD ANDERSON
Assignment Reporter

In light of a possible lawsuit by Kansas against the state of Nebraska, an otherwise quiet Natural Resources Committee hearing attracted a full room of testifiers in the Capitol Thursday.

The hearing was held to discuss LB921, which would prohibit the drilling of wells in the Republican River Basin and require a meter for each well currently in use.

Sen. Chris Beutler of Lincoln, who proposed the bill, said the moratorium on drilling wells would limit the amount of water depleted from the Republican Basin.

The proposed bill comes at a time when the Kansas governor's office has indicated its intent to pursue a lawsuit against Nebraska for not complying with the Republican River compact signed by Nebraska, Colorado and Kansas in 1943.

The pact requires each state to monitor how much surface water is depleted from the Republican River Basin and set limits on the amounts.

The state of Kansas has not only complained about the amount of

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water depleted from the Republican Basin, but also how that amount is calculated.

Mike Jess, a Nebraska compact commissioner, said water consumption in the basin is currently estimated by local Natural Resource District officials.

He said the estimations are accurate, but not exactly precise.

Kansas and Nebraska commissioners originally began negotiations two years ago, Jess said, but Kansas representatives walked away last year.

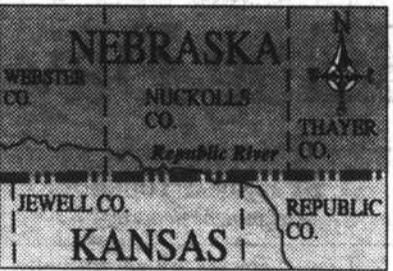
Gov. Ben Nelson testified the Kansas government has since refused to continue negotiations.

The governor said he would prefer to settle the dispute by talking.

"I'd prefer that they sit down at the table with us, so we can learn what in fact they expect," he said.

Steve Grasz, chief deputy attorney general, read a letter from Attorney General Don Stenberg stating he was confident Nebraska could defend itself if Kansas were to seek litigation.

The letter also indicated opposi-



tion to LB921. The passage of the bill, it said, would weaken or undermine the state's position.

Wayne Heathers, general manager of the Middle Republican NRD, testified in opposition to the bill.

He said the bill would supersede Nebraska laws that give the local NRDs power over natural resources in their districts.

Heathers, as well as other testifiers, expressed concern for the cost of installing pumps and the decline in the price of land that cannot be irrigated.

He and Jess said they were not convinced LB921 would prevent Kansas from filing a lawsuit.

Such lawsuits can last years, Jess said. The costs of litigation, for which the states are responsible, can cost millions of dollars.

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Regents could name field after Osborne

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Osborne's reluctance to the field's naming was because of the coach's "aw, shucks" modesty.

"I certainly respect his modesty — it's very characteristic of Tom Osborne," Wilson said. "I certainly do not want to do something that would really offend him."

But, he said the "vast majority" of Nebraskans want to honor Osborne in a significant manner.

"I haven't talked to a single person with anything negative to say (about naming the field for Osborne.) Everyone has been supportive and

enthusiastic," Wilson said.

Regent Nancy O'Brien of Waterloo agreed: "I think Tom Osborne's career speaks for itself, as well as the fact that he is a generally wonderful person," she said. "He's done a lot for the state."

Osborne coached the Cornhusker football team to 25 winning seasons, including three national championships, in his 25 years of coaching.

"I think he has made one of the most significant contributions in Nebraska football history," Byrne said. "We need to remember the history when our athletes are playing on Tom Osborne Field."