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News

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*****Dr. John Johnston named to Frank Erwin Professorship in Obstetrical Biochemistry.

DALLAS--The Frank C. Erwin, Jr. Professorship in Obstetrical Biochemistry has been announced at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas. At the same time the professorship was approved by the UT Board of Regents June 12, Dr. John M. Johnston was named to the professorship effective July 1.

Johnston, professor of Biochemistry and Obstetrics/Gynecology, is noted for his work on the biochemistry of fetal lung maturation. The eventual goal of this research is the prevention of Respiratory Distress Syndrome (hyaline membrane disease) in newborn babies.

Each year some 40,000 premature babies die of this disease in the U.S. alone. Johnston heads a team of investigators in the Cecil H. and Ida Green Center for Reproductive Biology Sciences in the study of surfactant, the biochemical key to the lung maturation process. Surfactant is a protein-lipid complex. The lipid component is chemically similar to the non-stick spray used to coat frying pans.

Lecithin, one of the chief components of surfactant, begins to be produced by the lungs as early as the 24th week of pregnancy. It's not until around the 35th week, however, that lecithin is produced in adequate amounts to facilitate breathing after delivery. The normal length of gestation is 40 weeks.

By understanding the mechanism involved in the production of surfactant, researchers hope eventually to be able to stimulate more rapid maturation of the fetal lungs in high risk pregnancies. In these cases, RDS could then be avoided if the babies had to be delivered early.

Johnston has been on the faculty at the medical school since 1955. He spent 1962-63 as senior research fellow for the National Science Foundation at The University of Lund in Sweden. In 1973 he served as visiting professor at the Institut fur Medizinische Biochemie Der Universitat Graz in Austria. He received his Ph.D. in biochemistry at The University of Colorado School of Medicine in 1953.

The new professorship in obstetrical biochemistry has been established in honor of the late Frank C. Erwin Jr., well-known supporter of The University of Texas and chairman of the Board of Regents from 1966 to 1971.

Erwin, an Austin attorney, died Oct. 1 at the age of 60. He served 12 years on the UT Board of Regents and at the end of his second term was appointed special counsel to the Board in 1975.

He was a founder of the Longhorn Club, statewide UT athletic booster organization. He served as a member of the Democratic national committee from Texas and as president and secretary of the Texas State Democratic Executive Committee. As an undergraduate at UT Austin, he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

The Erwin professorship is funded by the Department of Obstetrics/Gynecology MSRDP.

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