

# SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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## MORALES RECEIVES PRESTIGIOUS ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION FELLOWSHIP

DALLAS — April 16, 1997 — A graduate of UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas has won one of six prestigious Robert Wood Johnson Foundation fellowships awarded to minority physicians.

Dr. Carmela Morales, who currently is completing a three-year fellowship in gastroenterology, received a \$315,000 fellowship that will enable her to continue her research for four more years.

"I feel very lucky to receive this award because it gives me the rare opportunity to perform research unencumbered for the next four years," Morales said.

Since November, Morales has been doing research in the laboratory of Dr. Jerry Shay, professor of cell biology and neuroscience. Morales' goal is to improve the accuracy of diagnostic tests for pancreatic, colon and liver cancers. She plans to do this by using the presence of telomerase, an enzyme that elongates the ends of chromosomes, to distinguish between noncancerous and cancerous cells in tissue sections. The ends of chromosomes, called telomeres, protect the chromosomes and regulate healthy cell division.

In most normal cells, telomerase is not active; the telomeres shorten; and the cells have a limited lifespan. In cancer cells, telomerase often is reactivated, allowing the cancer cells to divide indefinitely.

Morales also plans to correlate the presence of telomerase with tumor activity so that patients with more aggressive tumors can be identified and treated appropriately.

"It is really exciting being in an area of research where you can clearly see before you the potential clinical applications of your work. Certainly the fact that I use human tissue

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specimens and that I work with patients in doing these assays makes the research all that more rewarding," said Morales. With the support of the Robert Wood Johnson fellowship, Morales, a native of El Paso, will be able to continue this work.

"Carmela is an enthusiastic, energetic and smart physician who has already served as an outstanding role model for women medical students and house staff. She is now applying that same enthusiasm to her research project to dissect the role of telomerase in the progression of gastrointestinal cancers," Shay said.

The Minority Medical Faculty Development Program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is designed to increase the number of minority faculty in academic medicine who can foster the development of succeeding classes of minority physicians. Fellowships are awarded to minority physicians who have demonstrated exceptional academic and clinical skills. At present, only 4.3 percent of full-time faculty members in U.S. medical schools are minorities.

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