

'It's good to be the guinea pig'

My sister Claire calls me a "guinea pig" and she's right.

The health care services available to older



Ivan Arceneaux
Seniors in Action

Texans at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston were among my chief reasons for retiring to Galveston Island in 1996. When I heard about their Volunteer Registry, seeking

participants for research studies for the health and well-being of older persons, I became a guinea pig by signing up for any and all research projects that could contribute to improving our health care services.

Almost 600 volunteers have signed up with the Volunteer Registry. If you want to add another plus to your life as a volunteer, I suggest you become a "guinea pig" too. Call 800-298-7015 for more information about qualifying. They take medical history and run tests to screen aspiring applicants. It works out to be quite a bonus to the volunteer, as he or she receives all this extra medical attention for free. It's lagniappe, as we Cajuns say — a little extra something.

UTMB was awarded a \$6.5 million grant from the National Institute on Aging in 1999 to establish the Claude D. Pepper Older Americans Independence center, one of 12 regional centers nationwide. The center's major purpose is to study how muscle metabolism and function change with age and contribute to the loss of independence in older persons. Renewed in 2004 for an additional five years, the pro-

gram's new focus is to examine muscle function from interdisciplinary perspectives across the entire spectrum of biomedical investigation from molecular biology to outcome assessment.

Recently, I was one of hundreds of volunteers who responded to the UTMB Claude D. Pepper Research Center call for a new flu shot research project. Having lost relatives in the 1919 national flu epidemic, I have always shared the Arceneaux-Hebert family's concern for the effects of the common cold and the flu.

Every year in the USA, 5 percent to 20 percent of the population catch the flu, more than 200,000 are hospitalized from flu complications, and some 36,000 (mostly elderly) succumb to the flu. Currently, an annual flu shot protects the elderly against the flu, but not 100 percent.

The goal of this volunteer project is to perfect a less painful vaccination process requiring a lower dose of vaccine.

It's too late to volunteer for this particular research project, but it is not too late to take the flu shot to protect yourself during the fall flu season.

Claude Pepper, the Florida congressman and senator who passed away in 1989, is my all-time favorite Washington politician because of his long advocacy for older Americans. He rejected the idea that physical and mental decline were part of normal aging. Whenever a national issue affected the elderly, Claude Pepper was aggressively advocating for senior citizens in the whole country.

The U.S. Congress has been without a "Claude Pepper" senior citizens advocate for too many years. Why not ask the candidates for the U.S. House and the Senate seats, "Will you be the new Claude Pepper for us older Americans?"

America needs another Claude Pepper in Congress now.

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