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Hope for 'doomed from the womb'

By Catherine Clabby; Staff Writer

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Dr. **Jeffrey Lieberman** is no stranger to the ravages of schizophrenia. He encounters them regularly in psychiatric wards.

Last week, the psychiatrist listened intently to a middle-aged man in worn jeans and black slippers who is dogged by delusions that he is a warrior destined to battle the Antichrist. He was committed to Dorothea Dix Hospital in Raleigh after posting threatening letters.

Lieberman also listened to a wide-eyed woman in the same unit talk about living with an icy fear that someone or something is trying to kill her. "Sometimes my mind works overtime," she tried to explain. "Sometimes, it doesn't work at all."

Despite witnessing such suffering, **Lieberman** is hopeful. And he is stirring hope in others.

"Within my lifetime, we can reasonably expect a cure," he said with certainty after rounds at the clinical research unit he runs at Dix.

Lieberman, who is based at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and a huge cast of people all over the country are launching the largest-ever study of new and expensive anti-psychotic drugs. The effort fits with Lieberman's rejection of the notion that people with schizophrenia are "doomed from the womb," a view embraced by psychiatry for decades.

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Breaking the cycle:

Under that scenario, people destined to get ill live normal lives until they are young adults. Then some weakness in their brain emerges, and they start hearing voices and seeing things, often ending up so diminished that they cycle in and out of state hospitals, homeless shelters or prisons.

But **Lieberman** has helped build the scientific case that good treatment, especially early treatment, may alter the disease's progression and salvage lives. He is working in many venues - with the world's most advanced brain imaging equipment, in experimental clinics at UNC and Dix, and with the massive national drug study just launched - to identify what the best treatments could be.

"The program at UNC is a uniquely comprehensive study looking at the brain inside out and upside down, from the maternity to the geriatric wards, from biology to physiology to chemistry," said Leslie Wiener, a Paris-based director whose film "Schizophrenia: Stolen Lives, Stolen Minds" aired on the Discovery Channel two weeks ago and featured **Lieberman**.

Lieberman didn't always plan to be a hot-shot researcher. As a youngster in Cleveland, Ohio, his mother urged him to choose a profession. Early on he decided he wanted to be a doctor to help people, even though he won a full football scholarship to college and perhaps could have pursued an athletic career.

Psychiatry fascinated him in medical school in Washington, D.C., especially the notion that a complex series of chemical events ruled people's consciousness. When he later tried to treat schizophrenia, he grew frustrated with the available tools. So he found himself staging experiments, spending more time trying to detect subtle structural or

chemical changes in scans of patients' brains and identify the best means to control symptoms.

These days, Lieberman's workdays average 12 to 14 hours, with tasks such as editing scientific journals, advising doctoral students and revising grant applications piled on top of his complex research enterprise. He is the first to admit he doesn't get to spend as much time with his family as he would like. For years, vacations with his wife and two sons have piggybacked onto academic conferences.

"I'm not a well-rounded person. I'm prone to focus on work," he explains with his usual precision. "I get caught up in terms of intellectual motivation and the professional pride and the competition."

But he also has a reputation at UNC Hospitals for being a nice guy. Even though he no longer takes care of patients on his own, he still gets letters and phone calls from people who know of his work and are desperate for advice on how to help sick relatives. He will meet with them and offer advice. And he remains in touch with families of patients he worked with in New York City.

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Research beacon:

Lieberman, who is 52, was recruited to UNC in 1996 from the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York as part of a campaign to strengthen the university's neurosciences program. By the time he arrived in Chapel Hill, he had already built a name as a leading researcher into possible stages of schizophrenia and strategies to better help its victims, who traditionally have gone as long as one or two years without treatment after becoming sick.

Already he has had significant impact, helping UNC and Duke jointly acquire the most sophisticated brain-imaging equipment available, creating innovative clinics to monitor and treat young people and overseeing a basic science research team. Last year he was named the fifth most frequently cited researcher in the field of psychiatry by the Institute for Scientific Information in Philadelphia.

"He's completely changed our conceptualization of schizophrenia," said Dr. Robert Golden, chairman of psychiatry at UNC. "We are much more likely to suggest to patients and families that they ought to aggressively treat the disease. In the old days we would wait to see if they really needed it."

Lieberman's biggest project right now is the \$42 million drug study nicknamed CATIE, which will compare new medicines, called atypical anti-psychotics, against old treatments. Many doctors like the new drugs because they cause fewer side effects, which makes it more likely patients will stay on them. But they are sometimes reluctant to prescribe them because they are so expensive, averaging close to \$4,000 a year and as much as \$10,000.

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Recruiting for CATIE:

The largest research project ever funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, or NIMH, CATIE might answer whether the drugs are worth it. To do that, Lieberman's team in Chapel Hill, along with researchers all over the country, are recruiting patients at 80 locations, including nearby UNC Hospitals, Duke, Dix and John Umstead Hospital.

The work isn't always exotic. Over the past year, **Lieberman** has spent hours each week on his black desk phone at UNC in conference calls with fellow researchers working out the details. Some days it gets down to figuring out what pill-box design will best help nurses judge whether patients take their medications and which lab can store and process blood samples cheapest.

Still, his results are eagerly awaited in the field of medicine. Preliminary findings are expected in a couple of years. Countless people outside medicine are waiting, too, especially those who have lost healthy family members to a mysterious and ruinous disease.

"Every time there is another psychotic break, the possibility of a person recovering is less and less," said Shirley Strobel, president of the Durham chapter of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, who has seen **Lieberman**

speak locally and at national meetings. "If you could prevent those breaks, you could prevent that deterioration. You would not have the chronically mentally ill."

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Dr. **Jeffrey Alan Lieberman**:

Born: March 17, 1948, in Cleveland, Ohio.

Family: Wife, Rosemarie Catherine Fernandez **Lieberman**; two sons, Jonathan Alfredo, 20, and Jeremy Andrew, 15.

Position: Thad and Alice Eure Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry, Pharmacology and Radiology at UNC, a position endowed by the Raleigh-based Foundation of Hope, which raises money for mental health research. Also, director of Mental Health and Neuroscience Clinical Research Center, UNC School of Medicine; director of Clinical Research Unit, Dorothea Dix Hospital; principal investigator and director of the National Institute of Mental Health's Clinical Anti-psychotic Trials of Intervention Effectiveness Research Program.

Education: Miami University, bachelor's degree in biology; George Washington University, medical degree; St. Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center, medical residency; Bronx Psychiatric Center, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, research fellowship.

Most recent honors: Stanley Dean Research Award from the American College of Psychiatry, Kempf Award for Research in Psychobiological Psychiatry from the American Psychiatric Association.

Religious life: Member, Judea Reform Congregation in Durham.

Nonwork pastimes: Opera, running, tennis.

Favorite opera: "Turandot" by Giacomo Puccini.

On the Triangle vs. New York City: "The Research Triangle area has an incredible mix of people highly trained in so many academic disciplines. There are people here from all over the world. This area of the South has physical beauty and a wonderful climate. There is still a patina of Southern gentility and charm. The only problem is that I can't go to the Met (The Metropolitan Opera)."

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UNC psychiatrist Jeff **Lieberman** won the largest research contract awarded by NIMH.

Staff Photo By Chuck Liddy

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