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News Release

Mobile, Ala. (April 24, 2006)

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Wertelecki To Speak on Long-term Impact of Chernobyl nuclear disaster

Dr. Wladimir Wertelecki, chair of the University of South Alabama department of medical genetics, will be among a select group of people invited by Kateryna Yushchenko, the first lady of Ukraine, to participate in an international symposium focusing on the long-term impact of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

The conference, which takes place in Kyiv on April 25, 2006, commemorates the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and features leading scientific experts from around the world.

"Many scientists continue to learn - even 20 years after the disaster - about the lasting impact Chernobyl has on the people of Ukraine and how we can prevent birth defects in the future," said Wertelecki. "By setting up a systematic approach to birth defects data collection, we will be able to show to what extent low dose chronic radiation impacts the development of the unborn."

Modeled after the birth defects program he started in Alabama, Wertelecki in 2000 established an international collaborative birth defects surveillance network in Ukraine. The data gleaned from his six-year project identifies an epidemic of infants born with spina bifida and related malformations in every monitored region of Ukraine, but more so in the regions impacted by Chernobyl.

"At this stage of our surveillance it is essential that we continue collecting data and concurrently advocate for the immediate prevention of spina bifida and malformations," said Wertelecki. "Prevention is the key in addressing birth defects," he emphasized.

During the past six years, Wertelecki's studies were funded through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). USAID was created in 1961 as an agency to work on behalf of Americans to improve the lives of people throughout the world.

In addition to epidemic rates of spina bifida and related malformations, surveillance data collected in this project also demonstrated the adverse affect that alcohol consumption during pregnancy has had on children in Ukraine. Another finding was a cause of mental retardation in Ukraine. Collected data showed that mental retardation occurred when the child lacked sufficient stimulation in their environment needed to fully develop mental capacity. This was noted primarily among orphans.

"With the development of the birth defects surveillance program in Ukraine, we now have in place an infrastructure of physicians, administrators, parents, educators and humanitarian organizations to implement prevention strategies such as folic acid flour fortification, educational programs and other interventional initiatives."

Other speakers at the conference include: Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, general director-emeritus of the World Health Organization; Koichiro Matsuura, director general of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; Marku Niskala, secretary-general of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies; Frabrizio Saccomanni, vice president of the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development; Maria Kaczynska, the first lady of Poland; Sara Nazarbaeva, the first lady of Kazakhstan; Dr. Paula Dobriansky,

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United States under-secretary of state; U.S. Congressman Lincoln Diaz-Belart; author Paulo Coelho; and other researchers.

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Date last changed: April 24, 2006 12:04 PM

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