

## **UNC awarded \$2.5 million from NIH to direct collaborative research center**

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has been awarded \$2.5 million from the National Institutes of Health to establish a new cooperative research center for studies of sexually transmitted infections. The new Southeastern STI Cooperative Research Center will be based at UNC and directed by Fred Sparling, M.D., who is Professor of Medicine and Microbiology and Immunology. The five-year award will support the work of collaborating groups at UNC, Emory University in Atlanta, Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, the Uniformed University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, MD, and Duke University.

The center's work will be interdisciplinary in nature, involving microbiology, genetics, immunology, and animal models, as well as studies in humans. The goal is to determine the feasibility of vaccines for *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* and *Haemophilus ducreyi*, the bacteria which cause gonorrhea and chancroid. Both gonorrhea and chancroid are associated with considerable morbidity and serve as co-factors for transmission HIV. The need for a vaccine is particularly critical given recent trends in antibiotic resistance among these types of sexually transmitted infections.

The center will be made up of six research projects and three overlapping and synergistic cores. Marcia Hobbs, Ph.D., Professor of Medicine and Microbiology and Immunology, will serve as co-director, and leader of the microbiology core. Projects at UNC are headed by Chris Elkins, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Medicine and Microbiology and Immunology, and Alex Duncan, M.D., and Chris Thomas, Ph.D., both Assistant Professors of Medicine. A project at Emory is headed by Dr. Bill Shafer; another at VCU is directed by Dr. Cynthia Cornelissen; and a project at USUHS is headed by Dr. Anne Jerse. Shafer, Cornelissen and Jerse all did postdoctoral fellowships at UNC. Drs Herman Staats and Greg Sempowski at Duke head a sophisticated immunology core that supports many projects.

The new center is an outgrowth of a former center, also based at UNC, which was funded for 19 years. Of six former STI centers competing for research dollars, UNC was the only group to be re-funded.

Sparling also directs SERCEB, the SE Regional Center of Excellence in Biodefense and Emerging Infections, which receives about \$7.1M annually from the NIH. Both grants run through 2014.