

STILLWATER, Okla.—Dr. Rebecca Morton, Pathobiology professor at OSU's Center for Veterinary Health Sciences, studies tularemia, or as it's more commonly known, rabbit fever.

Her partnership with the Baylor College of Medicine will benefit from the new Presbyterian Health Foundation Veterinary Medical Research Laboratory.

"Tularemia is a wildlife disease," says Morton. "But people can get it, too, from contact with infected wildlife and ticks."

Tularemia is a systemic disease that can attack the liver, spleen, lymph nodes and bone marrow. Because tularemia is a bacterial disease it can be treated with antibiotics; however, if left untreated, the disease can cause a 30 percent mortality rate.

There are two major types of the bacterial agent that causes tularemia. Type A, the most severe form of the disease, and Type B, which can cause illness in people although it is rarely life threatening.

Both A and B agents are present in Oklahoma, and the state has one of the highest incidences of human tularemia in the nation. Morton says that several Oklahomans died from tularemia in 2000. "It can be a very serious disease."

It's virulent enough that the U.S., the former Soviet Union and Japan have all studied *F. tularensis*, the agent of tularemia, as a biowarfare agent.

"The recent concern with bioterrorism has enhanced funding for research on tularemia, plague, anthrax and other potential biowarfare agents," says Morton.

She says 90 percent of the organisms studied for biowarfare applications are animal borne diseases, and because of that, veterinarians have been able to use their knowledge to secure funding and conduct research with many of the agents. It has been an opportunity for veterinarians to demonstrate their expertise in infectious diseases. The Veterinary Center's new facility will enhance OSU's capabilities to continue this research.

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