

B SECTION

HEALTH

Real thing or artificial?

Live Christmas trees are popular, but manufacturers of artificial trees aren't giving up the fight. Story on page 4B.



Mistletoe and Magic

Looking for something special to do this weekend? How about an evening of magic?

The Black Professional Coalition will hold its annual dance "Evening of Mistletoe and Magic" Friday at First Union Atrium, 301 South Tryon St.

The Black Professional Coalition is made of members of the Association of Black Accountants, Charlotte Area Association of Black Journalists, Association of Black Lawyers, Society of Black Engineers, Black MBA Association, Urban Bankers and the Forum for Black Public Administrators.

Tickets are \$15 in advance or \$20 at the door. For more information, call 559-6401.

Holiday dance

Second Ward High School Alumni will hold their annual Holiday Dance, Dec. 27 at Grady Cole Center.

Tickets are \$10. For more information, call 392-5286.

Thursday

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Senior Centers continues its series of workshops for grandparents raising grandchildren at 7 p.m. The workshop will teach grandparents to recognize their children's special needs.

NAACP Charlotte-Mecklenburg County Branch Meeting, 7 p.m. University Park Branch, 2400 Keller Ave.

The Metrolina Black Automotive Employees will host a Hunger Party at the Excelsior Club, 921 Beatties Ford Road at 7 p.m. Admission is five canned goods, toys or a \$5 donation.

Friday

The Coca-Cola Caravan tour rolls into Charlotte for five shows. The show features giveaways, photo opportunities and a visit from Santa Claus. Shows will be held today at 10:30 at Super KMart, 545 Highway 29, Concord, Eastland Mall, 5 p.m.

Saturday

Renaissance Place, Friends for All Seasons and the Youth and College Division of the NAACP will hold a Christmas Party for Charlotte's needy youth. Children and young adults will be the special guests for event which includes dinner and giveaways.

The 100 Black Men of Charlotte

See AROUND CHARLOTTE page 3B

Bodies yield clues to life and death Surgery can be avoided

By Randall Chase THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHAPEL HILL - Dr. John Butts picks up the skull laid out on the stainless table along with a pile of bone fragments, dispassionately noting the distinguishing characteristics.

"She has some fresh broken ribs...This is a fresh break," Butts said, holding up two pieces of bone. "You can see they match together, and there's no healing around it."

The hole in the skull needed little interpretation by North Carolina's chief medical examiner.

"It's foul play," Butts said. Winston-Salem police used the information to identify the victim as Teresa Ann Johnson, 35, whose decomposing remains were found

in a field in August.

"We tell the authorities what kind of person they have, then they go about figuring who it might be," said Butts.

While such cases often grab headlines, it's just another day at the office for the state's chief medical examiner.

Butts oversees a staff of about 30, including five pathologists, as well as a statewide network of county medical examiners and contract pathologists.

Their mission is to see that all deaths of a suspicious, unusual or unnatural nature are adequately investigated.

"I do enjoy the problem-solving aspect of it," Butts said. "Actually, most of medicine is problem solving, and certainly what we do here is that."

And real life is nothing like

"Diagnosis Murder" or "Quincy."

"Unlike the movies and TV, you cannot go in there, kneel over a body, make a few observations and measurements, then say 'Well, I put the time of death between 8 and 8:15 last night,'" Butts said.

In fact, a proper autopsy can take hours of painstaking work.

"If it's a fellow like I did the other night, who had been shot multiple times, you might spend hours tracing out the paths of the bullets, recovering the fragments or bullets to be used for evidence," Butts said. "Taking documentary photographs, making diagrams, that's often a very, very long process."

There are also tissue samples to examine and the toxicological analysis to be made before the final report is ready to be filed.

"Our clients might be dead, but our patients in a sense are often quite alive, if we're talking about the next of kin, law enforcement, newspapers," Butts said.

Ten percent of all North Carolina deaths are autopsied. Half of those are defined as medical-legal autopsies, which involve sudden or unexpected deaths and all deaths involving violence or trauma.

Pathologists in the chief medical examiner's office perform about 1,200 autopsies a year, roughly a third of the total. The others are done by pathologists who work under contract with the medical examiner's office and are referred cases by local medical examiners. In all, about 40 percent of cases

See PATHOLOGY page 3B

Surgery can be avoided

By Laurant Neergaard THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON - Women who suffer excessive menstrual bleeding now have their first alternative to surgery: a heated balloon that can fix the problem right in the gynecologist's office.

The Food and Drug Administration approved Gynecare Inc.'s ThermoChoice on Friday. The Menlo Park, Calif., company estimates the outpatient procedure will replace 20 to 30 percent of the hysterectomies - the standard treatment - performed today.

"It's nice to have an option that's less invasive," said Dr. Kimber Richter of the FDA staff.

About 19 percent of all women suffer from excessive menstrual bleeding, called menorrhagia. The problem is one of inconvenience, as women can use more than a dozen menstrual pads in a single day, and is physically dangerous, because they can become anemic.

About 180,000 Americans undergo hysterectomies - the surgical removal of the uterus - every year to treat the disorder. That is major surgery, requiring weeks to recover. Another, less invasive option is called surgical ablation, where doctors cauterize the uterus with a laser or a scraper. But that requires such extensive surgical skill that only 20,000 procedures are performed every year.

ThermoChoice promises to be easy enough for many more gynecologists to offer.

A balloon on the end of a hollow tube is threaded up the vagina into the uterus and inflated with a liquid. When the balloon fills the uterine cavity, a cable that runs to an electronic control box begins heating the liquid until it reaches 188 degrees.

Eight minutes at that temperature destroys the uterine lining without the typical scraping. The water is withdrawn, the balloon collapses and the tube is removed.

In a study of 125 women given ThermoChoice or surgical ablation, both options were equally effective, controlling bleeding in 80 percent of patients for a year after the procedure.

Both choices were equally safe, the FDA concluded. But unlike surgical ablation, ThermoChoice does not require the woman to be put to sleep, a form of anesthesia that is risky.

ThermoChoice is not for every patient, the FDA emphasized. It cannot treat fibroids or uterine cancer, both of which can cause this bleeding.

And even though the procedure saves a woman's uterus, no one should attempt to get pregnant after ThermoChoice treatment, the FDA warned.

The therapy destroys a signif-

See BALLOON page 3B

Season's reason to be kind



ILLUSTRATION/JIM HUNT

Children of broken families can enjoy holidays, too

By Alan Wachtel, MD THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

'Tis the season to be jolly, but for children of divorce, this joyous time of year can serve as not-so-merry reminders of the division within their families. This is especially true when the circumstances of the divorce do not allow youngsters to feel loved by both parents.

But it doesn't have to be that way. There are several measures parents can take to help ensure children share in the wonder and happiness of the holiday season.

In many cases, children of divorce must contend with an exaggerated longing for the "perfect family" and the absence of connection and belonging that goes with it.

The first step toward a happy

holiday season is to set children's schedules. This should be negotiated well in advance by the parents and all involved should know the agenda.

There are many ways to configure visitation during the holidays. One parent, for example, can spend time with the children on Christmas Eve while the other has Christmas morning. This arrangement, if necessary, can alternate yearly.

For children, the holidays are what their parents make of them. The greater children's involvement with holiday plans, for example, helping to make decorations, or cooking, the more meaningful these days will be for them.

The creation of special traditions within each household can also bolster children's sense

of connection.

Each parent can foster their own traditions. For example, a parent and youngsters may bake cookies on Christmas Eve or make apple sauce at Hanukkah.

These activities present another opportunity to openly share with your child the joy and meaning they bring to you.

If young people are part of a blended family, parents can have all the children involved in these events. This can serve as a form of team building, that works best with actions rather than words.

As with intact families, each youngster needs to have a close relationship with each parent. The holidays are a good time to bolster this relationship by

having each parent spend extended one-on-one time alone with each of their children. At all costs children should never be made to choose between their parents.

Although young people rarely have visions of sugar plums, gifts are a major part of their holidays. The selection of a gift that relates to one of your child's interests can enhance the parent-child bond.

A budding artist, for example, may appreciate a special set of paints. A young naturalist may enjoy a book about the rain forest.

Gifts don't have to be expensive, but should reflect a personal understanding of each child. This type of present can help parents cultivate a lifelong bond with their children.

Holiday rush produces stress, exhaustion

By Penny Brown Roberts THE DAILY ADVERTISER

LAFAYETTE, La. - Psychotherapist Kathy Elliott always knows the holiday season has arrived when stressed-out patients come to her in full force.

Elliott, who is also a University of Southwestern Louisiana assistant psychology professor, said the stress begins before Thanksgiving. Individuals and families push themselves to the limit by baking that extra batch of Hanukkah cookies or sending out many greeting cards. By New

Year's Day, the rituals leave people feeling exhausted rather than renewed. They are often disappointed that the experience didn't meet expectations.

The holiday blues are brought on by the added stresses of the season, like coping with family tensions, financial worries from gift buying and physical exhaustion from shopping, traveling, feasting and drinking. Add that to the feeling of wistfulness that, despite all our best efforts, it really isn't shaping up to be the perfect Christmas we were expect-

ing. All that can lead some people into a mild depression.

"It's that cluster of negative feelings that are so common to people around the holidays," Elliott said.

"We have unrealistic expectations for the holidays that usually come from our childhood. If we had really good holiday seasons, then we want to repeat it in all its perfection. If we had bad holidays, we want to make sure that it's good this time."

Symptoms include traditional signs of depression like a loss of appetite, sleep impairment, lack of energy and a desire to avoid

holiday celebrations.

Some question whether the phenomenon really exists. A University of Cincinnati study found that suicides are actually lower in December, peaking between January and April.

"It might actually be a myth," said Terry Zenner, a social worker with Acadiana Family Counseling Service. "But all the interest it generates may serve a purpose in giving us permission not to feel euphoric when all other signals of the season turn it into a civic duty."

Elliott advises keeping the holiday season simple. Plan ahead by designing a schedule that includes everything from social engagements to addressing greeting cards. Don't put energy into activities you don't value, like another co-worker's party.

Don't set unreasonable expectations. If you don't get along with Aunt Mable the rest of the year, you probably aren't going to now.

Do what's meaningful to you, instead of taking cues from television shows or relatives.