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Texas Tech Health Sciences Center researchers are recruiting help from the university's general academic campus to find how diseases spread in West Texas. Childhood obesity and rabies are of particular concern.

"We're placing dots on the map, trying to understand how health trends occur the way they do in our region," notes Patti Patterson, M.D. "The nature of the work dictates that we have as much multidisciplinary influence as possible."

Patterson is vice president for Rural and Community Health at HSC. She is the principal investigator of the West Texas Rural EXPORT Center, which has received a major federal research grant to provide a framework for population-based studies.

Erin Braddock is one of Patterson's early recruits. She studied psychology and sociology as an undergrad and says these disciplines apply directly to Patterson's work.

"By having researchers with diverse backgrounds, we're able to see the questions that need to be asked," Braddock says. "I have the opportunity to find existing research and see what we can do to add to it. It's important to offer different perspectives, and that's where the multidisciplinary nature comes in."

Childhood obesity, which has more than tripled nationally in the last 30 years, remains a top priority for Patterson and her team. Another malady, rabies, spiked at an alarming rate throughout the nation in 2005.

"Rabies statistics are off the charts and we don't know why," Patterson says. "Last year they were relatively

a health sciences center located alongside its general academic campus. Researchers at HSC rely on cross-training programs that let them draw from other resources within the system. The West Texas Rural EXPORT Center collaborates with students, faculty and researchers in engineering, agriculture, and the arts and sciences. Such collaboration is essential, and Patterson cultivates it.

Patterson would like to see the initiative grow to include more population-based studies for Alzheimer's disease, which may be more prevalent in rural areas than in cities.

Fueling the need for further research is the war on terror. Tech researchers are examining ways infection could impact the health of rural areas, whether spread intentionally by terrorists or through natural disease processes.

"How would things be done or not done in the event of a major disease outbreak?" Patterson asks. "That's one of the big questions we have to keep answering. That's why one of our major interests right now is to get grant funding for Homeland Security."

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low. This year it's just the opposite, and that's something we're exploring further." Her specialty, public health, provides ways to help solve such mysteries as how diseases spread in a population and can help find ways to control them.

Texas Tech is unusual in that it has

— MICHAEL CASTELLON