



Press Release

State Health Department's Wadsworth Center Receives Two International Awards For Pioneering Advances In Communication Technology For People With Disabilities

ALBANY, June 28, 2005 – New York State Health Commissioner Antonia C. Novello, M.D., M.P.H., Dr.P.H. today announced that the Department's Wadsworth Center has received the prestigious international 2005 Altran Foundation for Innovation Award for its pioneering advances in Brain Computer Interface (BCI) systems to help individuals with severe disabilities effectively communicate with others by use of brain waves.

"As the winner of the 2005 Altran Foundation for Innovation Award, Wadsworth shows that our research centers are drivers of innovation and incubators for growth," Commissioner Novello said. "Governor Pataki has created an environment in which science and technology have flourished in New York State. I am very proud of Wadsworth's scientific community, its reputation as a renowned place to work, and its commitment to science in the pursuit of health."

The winning entry for the Altran Award is Wadsworth's Brain-Computer Interface (BCI) system, an alternative communication and control option for the severely disabled. The BCI team also received Italy's Pirelli INTERNETional Award last month.

The Altran Foundation for Innovation has been partnering with organizations since 1997 to introduce technological innovations and concepts that benefit the community by providing alternative approaches to traditional thinking. This year, Altran's competition encompassed the theme "Overcoming Social Exclusion through Science and Technological Innovation" and included multiple disciplines such as health, transportation, housing, lifelong learning, education and training, access to services, employment, and resources.

As stated by Pierre Dreux, Vice President of The Altran Foundation for Innovation, "This is an exciting time for Altran, the Wadsworth Center, and humanity. Wadsworth demonstrated pioneering technology that will certainly transform the lives of individuals with severe disabilities. Altran is delighted to provide the Wadsworth Center with the technological support and guidance it needs to bring this technology to the forefront of the marketplace."

In addition to Wadsworth's BCI, other finalists' entries included an electric all-terrain wheelchair, a wheelchair guided by brain waves, an exoskeleton to assist walking, and Internet innovations to help the deaf and hard of hearing. Wadsworth's winning entry was announced in Paris, France on June 16, 2005.

Under the leadership of Dr. Jonathan R. Wolpaw, Wadsworth's Laboratory of Nervous System Disorders submitted its BCI system to compete with 110 other applicants from 15 different countries. Wadsworth's BCI system allows people to move a computer cursor in different directions by way of their brain waves, making it possible for them to spell words, select computer icons, and even control other devices.

BCI systems provide a new communication channel for individuals with severe disabilities, such as Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS), brain and spinal injuries, cerebral palsy and other neurodegenerative diseases. It is a departure from conventional methods that require muscle control and therefore exclude people who are severely disabled.

The Wadsworth BCI system has been adopted by many other labs throughout the world; and the Wadsworth BCI group recently hosted the 3rd International BCI Meeting at the Rensselaerville Institute. Dr. Wolpaw's research is supported by the National Institutes of Health and the James S. McDonnell Foundation. He is chief of Wadsworth Center's Laboratory of Nervous System Disorders and a professor in the University at Albany's School of Public Health. He is also a member of the New York State Spinal Cord Research Board.

In addition to winning the 2005 Altran Foundation for Innovation Award, Wadsworth's BCI group accepted the 2005 Pirelli INTERNETional Award from the Pirelli Group in Rome, Italy. The Pirelli Awards are an international multimedia competition whose goal is the diffusion of scientific and technological culture via the Internet. The BCI Group won the information and communication technology category for its video submission describing and demonstrating BCI technology.

The Wadsworth Center, directed by Lawrence S. Sturman, M.D., Ph.D., is the most comprehensive state public health laboratory in the country. Wadsworth is unique among public health laboratories in its long history of research, a commitment that enriches its analytical, scientific and regulatory missions.

For more information on the Wadsworth Center, please visit its web site (<http://www.wadsworth.org>).