

# Unlocking the Mysteries of the Mind

*By Tracy Dingmann*

Most people don't even know it's there.

But tucked behind the University of New Mexico Medical School is the Mind Research Network, a nonprofit, world class neuroscience research institute where scientists use brain imaging to solve the puzzle of family-destroying disorders like schizophrenia, addiction and autism.

MRN was founded in 1998 with the help of New Mexico Sen. Pete Domenici, who sought to help researchers find better ways to diagnose and treat mental illness and brain disorders, said chief executive officers Dr. John Rasure. Domenici, who is now retired but was once a powerful leader in the U.S. Senate, had a personal reason to want to improve the way such maladies are found and treated. His own daughter suffered from schizophrenia and, like millions of families in the same position, Pete, his wife Nancy and their daughter had suffered through years of misdiagnoses and ineffective treatment.

Until very recently, doctors were forced to rely on observational behavior only in diagnosing mental illnesses like schizophrenia, Rasure said. But Sen. Domenici understood that the then-emerging field of neuroimaging 'or using magnetic resonance image scanners to examine brain activity and anatomy' could one day allow doctors to detect mental illnesses sooner and help them treat mental problems with more precision. One day, it may even be responsible for unlocking the mystery of schizophrenia, which is incurable but responds well to early and accurate treatment.

'Sen. Domenici had the typical ride that families experience with mental illness,' said Rasure. 'But he had a vision that he could change public policy and get federal money for a research facility in New Mexico.' For its first five years, MRN operated mainly as a foundation that provided pass-through federal grants to a number of health and science research institutions, including UNM, Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Los Alamos National Laboratory.

In 2005, MRN completed construction of the Pete and Nancy Domenici Hall, giving MRN scientists a permanent New Mexico home and allowing the center's clinical partnerships and diagnostic development capability to expand greatly. The MRN's unique in-house studies and its collaborations with other research institutions place it among the top neurodiagnostic facilities in the country.

But a number of MRN's programs help people right here in New Mexico. There's the EARLY Program 'or Early Assessment and Resource Linkage for Youth' which helps parents, teachers and teens themselves recognize the early signs of mental illness. The program is being done on a trial basis in Bernalillo County.

There's also the BabySQUID imager, which is housed at the MRN and is used to diagnose early signs of epilepsy, autism or fetal alcohol syndrome in babies, even preemies, or small children. Earlier this year, the MRN announced the founding of the Mind Discovery Fund, a campaign to raise funds for senior researchers and honor Sen. Domenici's commitment to understanding and treating mental illness. The 12-month campaign aims to raise \$1 million, to be used for matching grants to fund researchers doing crucial neuroscience work. For more information about the Mind Research Network, visit it online at [www.mrn.org](http://www.mrn.org).