

Former POWs' bones fail medical tests

Knight News Service

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Many former American POWs, released from North Vietnam prison camps two years ago in seemingly good health, are suffering from potentially serious loss of bone structure, a University of Michigan nutritionist has discovered.

The bone loss, in some cases as high as 45 per cent of normal bone mass, makes the bones weaker and could make them more susceptible to fractures and deformities.

Measurements of bone may show that an individual seemingly well recovered from nutritional stress may yet be a hollow shell, literally speaking, said Stanley Garn, a fellow of the UM Center for Human Growth and Development in a paper presented in Japan this weekend.

Moreover, such bone loss may have lasting effects, for bone lost in adulthood is not easily regained, Garn said in the paper written for the 10th International

Congress of Nutrition.

The study, conducted at the request of the U.S. Air Force, was based on arm and hand X-rays of 108 returned U.S. airmen who had been imprisoned from three months to eight years. The X-rays and bone diameter measurements were compared with those of normal men aged 20 to 50.

Garn and his colleagues found that the former POWs had far less bone mass than is usual for men their age, with bone losses averaging 10 per cent and going as high as 46 per cent.

One fourth of the men had severe bone loss. Many of the 30- and 40-year-old men had skeletal structures typical of 80-year-old men, whose brittle bones are the result of normal aging.

The POWs' bone loss was attributed to a number of prison-camp conditions, including a diet low in protein, vitamins and calcium (the major component of bone), infectious diseases, dysentery, and inactivity.