Spina bifida is considered a major disabling condition in North America, affecting one out of every 1,000 newborns in the United States. Spina bifida is a neural tube defect in which the vertebrae and/or spinal cord of the fetus fail to develop properly, resulting in varying degrees of damage to the spinal cord and brain. Today's sophisticated medical techniques have allowed many of the physical problems associated with spina bifida to become more manageable and most children born with the condition live well into adulthood. Recently, research has focused on the neurobehavioral effects associated with spina bifida, including difficulty with attention, memory, perceptual motor skills, organization, reading comprehension and math. There is a need to identify, understand, and begin to intervene in the learning problems often present in children, adolescents, and young adults with spina bifida.

**About the Presenter:** Jack M. Fletcher, Ph.D, is a professor of Pediatrics and Associate Director of the Center for Academic and Reading Skills at the University of Texas-Houston Health Science Center. In 1998, Dr. Fletcher was awarded a five-year, $5.7 million grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to conduct research on 583 children with spina bifida in five concurrent projects. Each of the five projects has a different primary focus, ranging from evaluating the genetic factors to investigating the causes of learning difficulties in individuals with spina bifida. The overall objective of this comprehensive research project is to identify sources of variability in spina bifida – genetic, environmental, and neurological – that explain variations in the neurobehavioral outcomes.