Larry King moderates panel of regional healthcare leaders at HSC

By Ina Fried

Howard Kahn, CEO of L.A. Care, drew a laugh from the audience and other panelists with his blunt advice during the Nov. 8 Southern California Health Leadership Panel, “Succeeding with Reform: Understanding Access and Quality.”

Among Kahn’s observations: Improving access to health care may be an open and shut case. Health care providers need to open lines of communication both with their patients and with each other. And members of the general public need to “shut our mouths,” to curb smoking, drinking and obesity—the biggest controllable risk factors for cardiac and other diseases.

National health policy leaders convened at the Keck School of Medicine to discuss the pressing issue of increasing access to cardiac care for uninsured, under-insured and low-income populations.

The panel discussion was followed by a “Road to Health” fair and free health screenings. The fair, also held at the Keck School of Medicine, was designed to raise awareness about the prevalence and prevention of cardiac disease.

Talk show host Larry King, founder of the Larry King Cardiac Foundation, hosted the event in partnership with Los Angeles-based COPE Health Solutions, LAC+USC Medical Center and the Keck School.

The Larry King Cardiac Foundation was established in 1988 to provide funding for life-saving treatment for uninsured, under-insured and low-income populations in seeking adequate cardiac care.

He added that “the most at-risk individuals are also the patients least likely to be able to access the care they need.”

Several panelists quoted statistics indicating that members of low-income populations are less likely to see a doctor, to have cardiac diagnostic procedures and to be treated for cardiac disease.

COPE Health Solutions, a non-profit healthcare corporation, works with health systems to improve efficiency and coordination of care delivery. “We have successfully redefined managed care for the uninsured in Los Angeles County, connecting patients with the care they need, when they need it and where they need it,” noted Allen Miller, CEO of COPE Health Solutions.

“The Camino de Salud (Healthy Path) is a non-profit community health center that has successfully redefined managed care for the uninsured in Los Angeles County, connecting patients with the care they need, when they need it and where they need it,” noted Allen Miller, CEO of COPE Health Solutions.

USC researchers show how cancer cells can switch off crucial genes

By Meghan Lewit

A new study led by USC researchers identifies how genes are silenced in cancer cells through distinct changes in the density of nucleosomes—the units that package DNA into chromosomes inside the cell nucleus.

The findings, published in the Nov. 13 issue of the journal *Cancer Cell*, will enable researchers to explore new therapies to switch the genes back on and may lead to novel treatments for human cancers, said study lead author Peter A. Jones, director of the USC/Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center and Distinguished Professor at the Keck School of Medicine.

“The study shows for the first time exactly how genes get shut down in cancer cells,” Jones said. “It identifies what the target looks like so that new therapies can be designed to turn them back on.”

The study showed that silencing of transcription start sites in some cancer cells involves distinct changes in nucleosomal occupancy—or the density of nucleosomes—in the cell.

Researchers found that three nucleosomes, almost completely absent from start sites in normal cells, are present in the methylated and silenced promoter, suggesting that epigenetic silencing may be accomplished by the stable placement of nucleosomes into previously vacant positions.

DNA cytosine methylation—the addition of a group of specific chemicals to a stretch of DNA that can lock or silence a gene—may ultimately lead to silencing by enabling the stable presence of nucleosomes at the start sites of cancer-related genes, the study suggests.

“We believe these findings will contribute to the development of cancer therapies,” Jones said. “We were surprised to find how rigid the inactive structure is, and how rapidly it can be dissolved by drug treatment.”

The study was supported by a grant from the National Institutes of Health.

USC study examines age and ethnicity differences in eye problems

By Carrie St. Michel

In a study of more than 6,000 Los Angeles-area children—the largest study of its kind—researchers at the Keck School of Medicine found that both strabismus (commonly known as cross-eyed or wall-eyed) and amblyopia (often referred to as lazy eye) were more prevalent in older children than in younger children.

The study is currently available in the online edition of the journal Ophthalmology.

The population for this first phase of the Multi-Ethnic Pediatric Eye Disease Study (MEPEDS) was composed equally of African-American and Hispanic youngsters, ages six months to six years, who reside in the Los Angeles County community of Inglewood.

The overall prevalence of strabismus was 2.5 percent; while this finding remained constant regardless of gender or ethnicity, prevalence trended upward with increasing age.

The overall prevalence of amblyopia, which was 2.6 percent in both ethnic groups, similarly trended upward with age, although researchers concluded that this trending stabilizes by three years of age. As with strabismus, researchers found no difference when amblyopia results were stratified by gender.

“This is the first evaluation of strabismus and amblyopia in these two ethnic groups,” said principal investigator Rohit Varma, professor of ophthalmology and preventive medicine at the Keck School of Medicine, and director of the Ocular Epidemiology Center at USC’s Doheny Eye Institute.

“What was most surprising about our findings,” he adds, “was that the vast majority of children who we diagnosed with either strabismus or amblyopia had been previously undiagnosed and hadn’t received any care. Both of these disorders can be detected by age three, so this points to a crucial need for early screening and intervention programs that could prevent lifelong visual impairments,” he said.

According to Susan Cotter, the study’s co-principal investigator and a research professor of ophthalmology at the Keck School, “These study results fill an important gap in our knowledge base regarding the magnitude of strabismus and amblyopia in infants and young children, as well as our understanding of age-related differences in these children. MEPEDS results will likely impact the development of vision screening programs and health-care policy.”

This population-based, multi-phased study began in January 2004. With the Inglewood portion of the study completed, USC researchers are now conducting vision screenings in Southern California’s Riverside County. When these screenings are completed, children in the Southern California community of Monterey Park will be assessed.

Web development team targets The Doctors of USC Web site for major redesign

By Cheryl Bruyninckx

A major Web redesign project for The Doctors of USC took a leap forward recently with a visit from the creative firm leading the effort.

A seven-member marketing team from Swanson Russell Associates, an outside marketing firm working with USC Health Sciences Public Relations and Marketing, arrived at the Health Sciences Campus for a three-day site visit beginning on Oct. 15.

The team scouted out key storylines, graphics and other content for the new Web site while touring the Health Sciences Campus, including LAC-UNS

The Southern California Environmental Health Sciences Center (SCEHSC) is seeking applications for the 2008 Environmental Health Research Pilot Project Grants. The SCEHSC awards one-year pilot projects up to $25,000. The goal of this program is to advance environmental health research and to enable investigators to seek external funding to pursue larger scale projects.

Eligible applicants include faculty or graduate students/post-doctoral researchers with a faculty sponsor. Young investigators are particularly encouraged to apply and, with all other factors equal, will receive funding priority.

Applicants should submit a one-page Letter of Intent describing their proposed projects by Nov. 26 to Krissy Nielsen at Kristen@usc.edu. Nielsen may be contacted for more information at (323) 442-2750.
Keck School collaborates in opening Memory Assessment Center in Coachella Valley

By Pamela Bieri

A collaboration between the Keck School of Medicine and the Alzheimer’s Association’s California Southland Chapter is the first of its kind in the nation and creates the most comprehensive diagnostic center for Alzheimer’s disease, memory loss and related disorders in the Coachella Valley.

The Memory Assessment Center opened Nov. 8 in the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic Medical Building (formerly Hope Square) on the Eisenhower Medical Center campus in Rancho Mirage. The center was endowed in perpetuity from a $2.5 million gift through the Keck School of Medicine from Helene and Lou Galen, longtime USC benefactors and Coachella Valley philanthropists.

Lou Galen died earlier this week after a brief illness. He was 82. The Memory Assessment Center is also funded by a leading gift from Ann Marie and Robert Byfield, longtime Alzheimer’s Association benefactors; annual grants from The Judy Fund, established by Marshall Gelfand, through the Alzheimer’s Association; and the Maxwell Charitable Trust.

“It is estimated that 8,000 people in the Coachella Valley are experiencing a disorder that hinders their ability to live independently and pursue activities they enjoy,” said Dr. Lily Tseng, assistant professor of clinical neurology at USC, who specializes in Alzheimer’s disease, vascular cognitive impairment and other memory disorders. The center also employs nurse practitioner Nasrin Esnaashari, who has previous expertise in stroke and critical care nursing.

As a leader in Alzheimer’s research, USC offers Valley residents opportunities to participate in genetic and other research studies locally. Clients of the center may be included in State of California and National Alzheimer Coordinating Center databases, as well as studies funded by the National Institute on Aging.

In addition, the Alzheimer’s Association provides a part-time care consultant to the center. Care consultation is a group of services to assist the person with Alzheimer’s disease or related dementias and/or their families in planning for and dealing with all aspects of the illness, including assessment of needs, assistance with planning, problem solving and provision of support.

“This important medical component enhances our services to Coachella Valley residents,” said Stephen Geist, regional director for the Alzheimer’s Association of the California Southland. “The Memory Assessment Center now makes it possible for people in the desert to obtain a complete medical workup and diagnosis without having to travel outside the area. The center adds diagnosis and research to our two-tiered mission of compassionate care and finding a cure for Alzheimer’s disease.”

Eisenhower Medical Center is equipped to provide critical diagnostics tests including laboratory studies, and MRI, CT and PET imaging, making it a convenient location for the center.

“The Memory Assessment Center furthers Eisenhower’s vision to offer comprehensive health care that addresses the diverse needs of the Valley’s residents,” said G. Aubrey Sterling, president and chief executive officer of Eisenhower Medical Center.

The new Memory Assessment Center in the Coachella Valley is open Tuesday through Thursday 8 a.m.-4 p.m. For appointments, call (760) 341-5315.

It is a satellite of the USC Memory and Aging Center, which is dedicated to research and care of Alzheimer’s and related disorders in diverse communities.

Preventive medicine expert Thomas Valente honored by APHA

Thomas Valente, associate professor of preventive medicine at the Keck School of Medicine, received the inaugural Everett M. Rogers Award at this year’s American Public Health Association Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., on Nov. 3-7.

This award is given to an individual who has made an outstanding contribution to advancing the study and/or practice of public health communication. Valente has authored two books and more than 85 articles and chapters on social networks, behavior change and program evaluation.

In addition, USC faculty gave oral presentations on seven studies during the meeting, including “Impact of child health insurance expansions on ambulatory care-sensitive hospitalizations in California,” “Reasons for urban trail use predict trail-related physical activity” and “Trends in access to care for immigrant children in California: 2001 to 2003.”

PANEL: Coordinated care and enhanced access for patients can be financially viable

Continued from page 1

Road) Network not only improves the health of patients through enhanced access and coordination of care, but is a financially sustainable model that can be replicated in communities across the country,” Miller said.

The value of technology in establishing medical networks was cited by Leslie Saxon, chief of the division of cardiovascular medicine at the Keck School of Medicine.

“When I look at the American health care delivery system, I see the best specialists in the world,” she said.

But, she added, “I think there’s an issue of gaps in care and information silos. We’ve overcome gaps in the media, we’ve overcome them in entertainment—with networks. The military is working on networks, and that’s a pretty complex institution, certainly as complex as medicine. I think these networked devices and networked information can really be promising ways to solve some of these problems.”

The panel, introduced by Pete Delgado, CEO of LAC-USC Medical Center, included these national and California health care experts:

• Joe Dunn, CEO, California Medical Association
• Howard Kahn, CEO, L.A. Care
• Jeanne Lambrew, fellow, Center for American Progress, and associate professor, LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin
• Pat Mackin, senior vice president and president, Cardiovascular Disease Management, Medtronic
• Leslie Saxon, chief, Division of Cardiovascular Medicine, Keck School of Medicine of USC
• Bruce Vladeck, executive director, Health Services, Ernst & Young

Following the morning panel discussion, Keck School Dean Carmen Puliafito hosted a brunch for King, the panelists and other special guests. “We appreciate Larry King’s leadership,” he said, “and his contributions to public health,” not only providing care for patients through the Larry King Foundation, but also “bringing forward the health policy and social and political issues.”
A Nov. 12 San Fernando Valley Business Journal article reported that 45 children from the San Fernando Valley will visit the Keck School as part of Kaiser Permanente’s Hippocrates Circle Program, which promotes diversity among health care professionals.

A Nov. 9 U.S. News and World Report article quoted rheumatologist Andreas Reiff on research that demonstrated certain drugs are effective in treating juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. HealthDay ran a similar story.

On Nov. 9, KCBS-TV Channel 2 featured the opening of The Memory Assessment Center, a collaboration between the Keck School and the Alzheimer’s Association, California Southland chapter. The segment noted that USC neurologist Lily Tseng will direct the center.