Peter Jones receives prestigious AACR award

Peter A. Jones, director of the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center and distinguished professor of urology, biochemistry and molecular biology at the Keck School of Medicine of USC has been awarded the 2009 Prize for Basic Cancer Research from the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) and the Kirk A. and Dorothy P. Landon Foundation.

He shares the award with Stephen B. Baylin, professor of oncology at Johns Hopkins University.

The Landon-AACR prizes are recognized as among the most prestigious international awards given to cancer researchers by a professional society of their peers. Honorees receive an unrestricted cash prize of $100,000 per award. The prize was awarded on April 20 at the AACR 100th Annual Meeting 2009, held in Denver, Colorado. Jones presented a special lecture during the meeting.

“It is a great honor to be presented with the Landon-AACR award, and in particular, to be recognized by my peers, for work which was entirely done at USC over a period of 32 years,” said Jones.

Keck School Dean Carmen A. Puliafito hailed Jones’ honor, saying, “The entire Keck School family extends our hearty congratulations to Dr. Peter Jones on this prestigious award, which recognizes his dedication to discovery throughout his career at USC. Peter is well recognized around the world for his scientific acumen, and this is a well-deserved honor.”

Jones and Baylin were selected for the basic cancer research prize for their work in the emerging field of epigenetics. Researchers have determined that there is a second layer of genetic information not contained in DNA, but rather embedded in the proteins that package or surround DNA. These “epigenomes” control access to genes, allowing each cell type to activate its own genes while blocking most of the rest. The Landon-AACR prize cites Jones and Baylin for their work in establishing that there is a major epigenetic component of cancer causation and malignant cell growth.

“It’s very rare in science that you can say the work of individual investigators revolutionizes cancer research, but Peter Jones and Stephen Baylin have achieved that kind of paradigm shift,” said AACR chief executive officer, Margaret Foti. “Their work has changed the way we view molecular causation from a genetic to an epigenetic focus. The potential impact of this work is enormous, and it is already resulting in significant improvements in cancer diagnosis and therapy.”

In fact, a direct beneficiary of Jones’ research, Violet Yorke, recently celebrated her 80th birthday at the Judy and Larry Freeman Cancer Day Hospital. More than two years ago, she was diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia, an aggressive cancer of the blood, but her medical condition precluded the use of standard chemotherapy. However, after Yorke enrolled in a USC clinical trial with the drug azacitidine (Vidaza), she has been in remission. Jones discovered almost 30 years ago the ability of azacitidine to inhibit DNA methylation. See JONES, page 2

USC researchers identify strong new anti-cancer compound

By Meghan Lewit

USC researchers have identified a new drug compound that appears to target tumor cells and surrounding blood vessels without the negative side effects typically associated with Cox-2 inhibitors.

The compound 2,5-dimethyl-celecoxib (DMC) appears to have a strong anti-tumor effect while also surrounding blood vessels without the negative side effects typically associated with Cox-2 inhibitors.

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FIGHTING CHILDHOOD OBESITY—The USC Childhood Obesity Research Center presented a symposium featuring obesity researchers from USC and around the country on April 17. The symposium examined the causes and implications of childhood obesity. Above, Robert Waterland, professor of pediatrics and molecular and human genetics at Baylor College of Medicine, speaks on epigenetic mechanisms in hypothalamic development.

JONES: Garners new awards, grants

Continued from page 1

methylation and determined how to use the drug as an epigenetic therapy for cancer. Yoke was treated by Allen Yang, assistant professor of medicine, who was mentored by Jones.

A past president of the AAGC, Jones serves as senior editor of the journal Cancer Research. He has received a variety of honors, including the Outstanding Investigator Grant from the National Cancer Institute. He holds the H. Leslie Hoffman and Elaine S. Hoffman Chair in Cancer Research at the Keck School. Jones is the author of more than 250 journal articles and book chapters. He serves on several national and international committees, panels and editorial boards.

In addition to the Landon award, Jones has received a National Institutes of Health (NIH) MERIT award to continue funding of his important work in epigenetics.

The MERIT—Method to Extend Research in Time—awards are among the most selective research grants given by the NIH, and extend their current grant for an additional three to five years with- out having to submit a traditional competing renewal application.

THE GAY-RUSSELL AWARD—The 2009 Gay-Russell Award went to Allen Yang, assistant professor of medicine, who was mentored by Jones. He has received a variety of honors, including the Outstanding Investigator Grant from the National Cancer Institute. He holds the H. Leslie Hoffman and Elaine S. Hoffman Chair in Cancer Research at the Keck School. Jones is the author of more than 250 journal articles and book chapters. He serves on several national and international committees, panels and editorial boards.

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The MERIT—Method to Extend Research in Time—awards are among the most selective research grants given by the NIH, and extend their current grant for an additional three to five years without having to submit a traditional competing renewal application. Jones’ award will extend funding for five years on a grant that was first funded in 1978.

Pharmacy students win $70,000 in research awards

Three USC School of Pharmacy Ph.D. candidates recently won awards of up to $50,000 to support their research projects in drug development, while another pharmacy student picked up an award from the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists for student leadership.

Doctoral student Tino Sanchez received a two-year, $50,000 dissertation fellowship from the California HIV/AIDS Research Program. CHRP provides funding to support HIV/AIDS research in California. Sanchez works in the lab of associate professor Nouri Neamati.

Sanchez is working toward the development of drugs for patients with HIV.

The disease works by invading immune cells, using three key enzymes—proteases, reverse transcriptase and integrase—for replication. Sanchez’s work targets the integrase enzyme as it is key in allowing viral DNA to invade host cells.

Among HIV therapies, there is currently only one integrase inhibitor that is FDA-approved.

Erik Serrao, who also works in Neamati’s lab, received a $19,000 Oakley Fellowship, part of the USC Graduate School Endowed Fellowship Competition.

The competitive Oakley Fellowship is available to Ph.D. candidates in any field university-wide.

Like Sanchez, Serrao’s research will also target the integrase enzyme. Serrao’s work focuses on the development of new compounds that can inhibit HIV integrase from incorporating the virus into chromosomes.

Ben Xu received a $3,000 Sjögren’s Syndrome Foundation student fellowship, which will help support his research project on Sjögren’s syndrome, an autoimmune disease that is characterized by tear gland inflammation and dry eye.

Xu is a Ph.D. student in the lab of Sarah Hamm-Alvarez, the Gavin S. Herbert Professor in Pharmaceutical Sciences and chair of the Department of Pharmacology and Pharmaceutical Science.

Third-year Pharm.D. candidate Paulin Heng received the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists Student Leadership Award. The award recognizes leadership in students interested in health-system pharmacy practice.

Heng received a $2,500 cash award and a drug information library valued at over $1,000.

Heng was judged on her health-system pharmacy practice achievement and professional leadership.

In addition to participation and leading various student pharmaceutical organizations, Heng also contributes to educational and screening programs that focus on underserved communities in Los Angeles.

Heng is currently the ASHP co-president of American Pharmacy Student Alliance and serves as the lead intern pharmacist at Olympia Medical Center in Los Angeles.

USC to host patient safety satellite broadcast

The USC School of Pharmacy will host the Southern California site for the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Patient Safety & Clinical Pharmacy Collaborative Live Satellite Broadcast on May 6.

This program is an opportunity for physicians, pharmacists, nurses, safety-net clinic and hospital clinic administrators and medical directors, elected officials and funders to hear from national leaders—sharing their experiences on the impact of clinical pharmacy services on the health outcomes of underserved populations seen in their clinics. Featured among the presentations is USC Professor Steven Chen who is part of a local HRSA team along with Paul Gregerson, chief medical officer at the JWCH Institute.

The event will be from 8 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Harlyne J. Norris Cancer Research Tower’s Aresty Auditorium.

The April 17 issue of The Weekly inadvertently omitted the final word of the story, “USC researchers pinpoint gene key to lupus development.” The full text of the sentence should have stated that Chaim O. Jacob, associate professor in the Department of Medicine, and his team have made the Function2Gene software available free of charge to the scientific community so that it may be applied to other complex diseases.
A permanent exhibit of 27 photographs by film director and photographer Irvin Kershner was unveiled March 26 at the Department of Anesthesiology at the recently opened LAC+USC Replacement Facility.

The exhibit, titled “Kitchen Illusions,” is a joint gift from Kershner and Vladimir Zelman, co-chair of the Department of Anesthesiology at the Keck School of Medicine and director of the division of neuroanesthesia at LAC+USC Medical Center and USC University Hospital.

The plates and fabrics in each photograph in the exhibit were collected from around the world. Through the use of shadowless light, the plates appear flattened. Real flowers, fruits and vegetables are incorporated as part of the design.

“We are thrilled to be able to include these beautiful works of art by Mr. Kershner in our new, state-of-the-art medical center,” Zelman said.

“Spotlight on Macular Degeneration” will feature 33 photographs by film director Irvin Kershner and Vladimir Zelman, co-chair of the Department of Anesthesiology, celebrate the opening of the exhibit of Kershner’s photography.

Macular degeneration forum slated for April 29

The California Institute for Regenerative Medicine (CIRM) and the Keck School of Medicine will present an educational forum on April 29 on advances in treatment of macular degeneration.

“Spotlight on Macular Degeneration” will feature speakers including Carmen A. Puliafito, dean of the Keck School of Medicine and member of the Governing Board of the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine. Also scheduled to speak are: David Hinton, professor of pathology at the Keck School of Medicine; Mark Humayan, professor of ophthalmology; Keck School of Medicine; and Shaton A. Hayes, a patient advocate.

The event, part of an all-day CIRM Independent Citizens Oversight Committee meeting, will be from 8:30 to 9:15 a.m. in the Keith Administration Building’s Mayer Auditorium.

For more information, call (323) 442-1661.

Noted director, USC physician donate art to LAC+USC

An April 20 Los Angeles Times article quoted Diana Chigos, head of the USC Norris Cancer Center Survivorship Advisory Council, about a recently published book, “Anticancer: A New Way of Life.”

An April 18 Los Angeles Times article highlighted research by cancer researcher Myles Cockburn into pesticides and Parkinson’s disease. The article also ran in Newsday, the Chicago Tribune, the Orlando Sentinel, and the Miami Herald.

An April 18 widely carried HealthDay News article highlighted research led by pathologist Florence Hofman that was presented at the American Association for Cancer Research annual meeting. Hofman’s team targeted brain cancer with an inhibitor called dimethyl-celecoxib, the story noted. Forbes and Reuters Health also highlighted the research.

An April 16 The Economist article quoted and highlighted research by cancer researcher David Agus in a story about start-up companies that offer consumers genome analysis.

An April 15 U.S. News & World Report article featured a study by Alzheimer’s expert Lon Schneider showing that newer antipsychotic drugs promote weight gain and lower levels of HDL cholesterol in Alzheimer’s patients. Reuters and Forbes also highlighted the research.

An April 14 New York Times article quoted urologist David Penson about the prostate cancer drug Provenge.

An April 9 Investor’s Business Daily article quoted pharmacoeconomics expert Joel Hay about how a drug company being the first to market a drug in a particular class doesn’t guarantee ultimate financial success.
Calendar of Events
This Calendar of events is also online at www.usc.edu/hsccalendar for the Health Sciences Campus community.

Monday, April 27

Tuesday, April 28

Wednesday, April 29


1 p.m. “Head & Neck Cancer Awareness.” Tom Labonge, LA Councilmember and Chief Bratton, LA Police Dept. HNRT Level G, Rm. 503. Info: (323) 442-7908.

Thursday, April 30
Noon. “Subversion of Innate Immune Activation by Hepatitis C Virus Infection.” Gyongyi Szabo, Univ. of Massachusetts. MBIR 100. Info: (323) 442-1253.

Friday, May 1
Noon. “Clinical Implications of Recent Discoveries in Liver Immunology.” Gyongyi Szabo, Univ. of Massachusetts. OPT ANG 129. Info: (323) 409-7995.

Monday, May 4

Wednesday, May 6
8 a.m. The HRSA Patient Safety & Clinical Pharmacy Collaborative (PHPC) Live Satellite Broadcast of Learning Session #3: various speakers. JHWT Atrium Conf. OTR. Info: (323) 442-1393.

Thursday, May 7

Friday, May 8
9 a.m. CORUC Team Seminar. “Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease.” Frank Sinatra, USC. CSC 250. Info: (323) 442-2637.

Thursday, May 14
Noon. “Epidemiologic Regulation of Hepatic Wound-healing and Fibrosis.” Jelena Mann, Univ. of Washington School of Medicine. MCI 156. Info: (323) 442-3121.

Tuesday, May 19

Notice: Deadline for calendar submission is 4 p.m. Monday to be considered for that week’s issue—although three weeks advance notice of events is recommended. Please note that timely submission does not guarantee an item will be printed. Send calendar items to HSC Weekly, KAM 400 or fax to (323) 442-3282, or e-mail to eblaauw@usc.edu. Entries must include day, date, time, title of talk, first and last names of speaker, affiliation of speaker, location, and a phone number for information.

USC physical therapist and community leaders highlight lack of fresh food in area neighborhood

By Sara Villagran

They have been working with Resnik to conduct small community-based studies and health assessments to further understand the root causes of health problems in Ramona Gardens. These studies have concluded that residents lack easy access to high quality and fresh food in the community. The speakers announced a plan to hold a Community Town Hall meeting in May 2009 to work on concrete solutions to aid local grocers in improving access in the future.

By Sara Villagran