Tiny worm leads Massry Prize winners to huge medical insight

By Ryan Ball

Gary Ruvkun has come a long way from living in his van after being denied medical school admission by USC and UCLA in the early 1970s.

He and fellow molecular biologist Victor Ambros recently received the prestigious Meira and Shaul G. Massry Prize for their revolutionary research in micro RNA (miRNA). Ruvkun, now a Harvard professor, and Ambros, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, presented lectures on their findings in Mayer Auditorium on Nov. 12.

miRNA are single-stranded RNA molecules that regulate gene expression. When Ambros and Ruvkun discovered these tiny strips of genetic material just over a decade ago, they set off an explosion in the field of genetic research.

"None of us had been thinking of looking for something that small," Ruvkun commented during his lecture at USC. "We've been riding this wave, and it's been an amazing ride." Ruvkun and Ambros independently began studying the presence and role of miRNA in tiny roundworms known as C. elegans. They eventually joined forces to push their research further.

The result was the breakthrough discovery that RNA, like proteins, can regulate the actions of DNA, slowing genes down, speeding them up or turning them off and on. It was previously believed that RNA was merely a carrier of DNA instructions.

"It's a tremendous discovery," remarked Shaul G. Massry, professor emeritus of medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of USC and founder of the Meira and Shaul G. Massry Foundation. "It opened a new field and a new understanding of how the genome really functions. In essence, it's trying to decipher the secret of life—how we come to be what we are."

The Massry Prize was established in 1996 to recognize outstanding contributions to the biomedical sciences and the advancement of health. Massry this year turned over management of the award to USC to ensure that it will continue to promote education and research in nephrology, physiology and related fields well into the future.

"I feel loyalty to USC," Massry explained. "I've been doing [the Massry Prize] now for 13 years and I'm not going to leave."

"In an effort to understand a little worm a little better, working together we've accomplished much more than we ever imagined we would," said Ambros. Like it or not, we are genetically only a few base pairs removed from worms, and the work of Ambros, Ruvkun and others in the field are likely to change the way diseases are treated in humans.

The knowledge that miRNAs are linked to certain types of cancer and genetic diseases can potentially lead to the development of new life-saving drugs.

"It's an amazing discovery," Ambros said.

Dana Johnson

USC updates policy governing relationships with industry

By Sara Reeve

Responding to the American Association of Medical Colleges’s (AAMC) challenge to universities to instill transparency with regard to relationships with industry, the deans of the Keck School of Medicine, the USC School of Pharmacy and the USC School of Dentistry announced an update to the university’s policy.

In a memo to faculty and staff sent Nov. 2, Keck School Dean Carmen A. Puliafito, School of Dentistry Dean Avishai Sadan and School of Pharmacy Dean R. Pete Vanderveen wrote that while relationships with industry have been vital to discovering and developing new technologies and treatments, "under no circumstances can we allow these collaborations to have or appear to have improper influence over our core missions of education, research and patient care."

The policy provides new guidance in a variety of areas, several of which were highlighted in the memo to faculty and staff:

- Consulting arrangements with outside organizations must now be disclosed, reviewed and approved prior to beginning work, effective Jan. 1, in order to ensure they do not present a conflict of interest or commitment, and must be disclosed to students, residents and fellows when relevant.
- Industry-sponsored speaker's bureaus are strongly discouraged, as they are defined by federal regulations as part of industry marketing activities.
- Faculty must remain in control of content presented and ensure it is based on the best scientific evidence available.

D. Brent Polk has been named chair of the Department of Pediatrics at the Keck School of Medicine, and chair of pediatrics and vice president of academic affairs at Children's Hospital Los Angeles, effective April 1, 2010.

A distinguished researcher and clinician, Polk will serve as professor of pediatrics and biochemistry and molecular biology at the Keck School.

As chair of pediatrics, he will be responsible for the department's educational, research and service missions, and he will oversee faculty working at affiliate hospitals Children's Hospital Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Country-USC Medical Center.

He will also serve as vice dean for clinical affairs (Children's Hospital Los Angeles).

"Dr. Polk is nationally and internationally recognized for his innovative research and comprehensive, caring treatment of pediatric patients," said Keck School Dean Carmen A. Puliafito. "His achievements have placed him on lists of America's Top 100 Pediatricians and Best Doctors in America in Pediatric Gastroenterology for the past five years. Dr. Polk's leadership will enhance the partnerships between the Keck School and both Children's Hospital Los Angeles and LAC+USC hospital. He is a gift to the young patients who will benefit from his care and expertise."

Richard D. Cordova, president and CEO of Children's Hospital Los Angeles, joined Puliafito in expressing enthusiasm for Polk's appointment.

"In an effort to understand a little worm a little better, working together we've accomplished much more than we ever imagined we would."

— Victor Ambros, professor of molecular medicine at the University of Massachusetts

D. Brent Polk
POLICY: Guidelines intended to minimize potential conflicts of interest

Continued from page 1

• Gifts and free meals from industry may not be accepted. Food delivered by or paid for by industry marketing representatives is defined as a gift, and may not be accepted.
• Pharmaceutical samples may no longer be distributed through individual clinics. Instead, all samples must be delivered to campus pharmacies for distribution to patients.
• Universities across the country have been called on to review their policies with regard to industry, and at USC, we felt it was important to ensure our practices were free from even the appearance of a conflict of interest," said Puliafito. “We want to support a culture of ethics, while supporting meaningful interactions with industry.”

The updated policy applies to any university employee who has direct or indirect influence over prescribing, dispensing or purchasing products made by pharmaceutical or biotechnology companies, medical/dental equipment and device manufacturers, and other health care suppliers.

This would include doctors, dentists, pharmacists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, nurses, clinic staff, hospital staff, residents, fellows and students. New language also emphasizes that the policy is applicable whether on or off campus.

“Collaboration with members of industry has produced remarkable opportunities for the dental field in general and the USC School of Dentistry in particular,” said Sadan. “However, current and future patients deserve treatment backed by solid, unbiased evidence, and we will continue to hold stringent standards about the roles that industry partners have in regards to clinical, research and community activities.”

According to Tammy Capretta, assistant vice president for health care compliance, “The policy was created with the assistance of university staff and faculty leadership. “I have to thank the USC Health Care Compliance Committee and the Academic Senate for their input in shaping the policy,” said Capretta. “I look forward to working with faculty and staff to help them understand how to implement these policy updates.”

Faculty and staff with questions about the policy can contact the Office of Compliance at (213) 740-8258. The office is currently working with the various departments to educate affected employees.

“We are grateful for the enthusiasm and support of our collaborators with industry, we are also careful to maintain a healthy distance, keeping undue influence far from our work,” said Vanderveen.

World AIDS Day fair slated for Dec. 1

By Joe Peters

Organizers of the Dec. 1 World AIDS Day Health Fair at the LAC-USC Medical Center have a simple message for the public: Get tested.

Stella Quan, organizer of the fair and senior health educator at LAC-USC Medical Center, said, “Here in L.A. County, we have approximately 54,000 people living with HIV. In addition, approximately 500 of people living with HIV are not even aware that they have this disease. Therefore there is definitely a need for education and to bring people in for testing.”

The fair, which will include information booths, health screenings and rapid HIV testing, will be from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the Courtyard Breezeway of the LAC-USC Medical Center, 2051 Marengo Way, Los Angeles.

For more information, contact Stella Quan at 323-343-8258.

MASSRY: Recipients often go on to win Nobel Prize

Continued from page 1

Nine previous recipients of the Massry Prize have gone on to win the Nobel Prize, and Massry is confident that Ambrose and Ruvkun will follow in their footsteps. The duo also presented lectures at UCLA, and they were honored with an elaborate ceremony at the Council Chamber of the City of Beverly Hills on Nov. 14. Chaired by Laurence H. Keders, the Massry Prize committee consists of Martin Perl, Harvey R. Hirschman and Joel D. Kupfer.

Futters' research is focused on improving the quality of life for infants and children with movement difficulties due to neurological insults.

Futters awarded Division of Physical Therapy’s first endowed chair

By Sara Villagran and Beth Dunham

A $1 million gift has established the first endowed faculty chair within the USC Division of Biokinesiology and Physical Therapy.

Linda Futters, professor and director of the Division’s Developmental Motor Performance Laboratory, has been named the inaugural holder of the Sykes Family Chair in Pediatric Physical Therapy, Health, and Development.

Tracy Sykes, a graduate of the USC Doctor of Physical Therapy Class of 1998, and husband Gene T. Sykes, a managing director with Goldman Sachs and Co., established the chair with a $1 million gift, along with a $250,000 matching pledge.

The division will seek additional funding sources to bring the total endowment to $1.5 million.

“We are extremely grateful for the Sykes’ generosity and vision,” said James Gordon, associate dean and chair of the division. “This gift will help us further establish our program as a national leader in pediatric physical therapy education, clinical practice, service and research.

After graduating from the Doctor of Physical Therapy program, Tracy Sykes worked in outpatient physical therapy in Santa Monica while continuing to support the division and its research goals. She has been a member of the Division’s Board of Councilors since 2004 and has lent her support to many initiatives, including the Biokinesiology Clinical Research Center campaign.

Sykes also supports research and education in physical therapy that benefits children, even allowing her own children to take part in classroom activities within the division and help students master pediatric strength evaluation and development assessment.

Futters was selected to fill the chair based on her extensive research in pediatric physical therapy, including experience in clinical practice, research, teaching and administration. Her research is focused on improving the quality of life for infants and children with movement difficulties due to neurological insults.

The establishment of the Sykes Family Chair in Pediatric Physical Therapy, Health, and Development supports a vision that focuses on enhancing the health and well-being of children through education of leaders in pediatric physical therapy and rehabilitation, advancement of cutting edge pediatric research, and outreach to communities neighboring the University of Southern California,” Futters said.

Futters teaches courses in development, pediatric physical therapy, and evidence-based physical therapy practice. In addition, she has developed physical therapy distance education and taught evidence-based physical therapy practice within a distance education format.

“Dr. Futters’ combined expertise will support the continuing vision of pediatric physical therapy at USC and the translation of this vision to excellence in education, practice, research and service,” Gordon said.

Next Issue: Dec. 4

The Weekly is published for the faculty, staff, students, volunteers and visitors in the University of Southern California’s Health Sciences Campus Community. It is written and produced by the Health Sciences Public Relations and Marketing staff. Comments, suggestions and story ideas are welcome. Permission to reprint articles with attribution is freely given.

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Editor: Ken Pera, Harvey R. Herschman

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**POLK: New chair of Pediatrics praised as ‘visionary, thoughtful’ leader**

By Ryan Ball

A push for less-invasive testing for breast cancer took center stage as leading breast disease specialists met for the recent American Society for Breast Disease (ASBD) Consensus Conference on Image Detected Breast Cancer III.

Organized every four years by Mel Silverstein, medical director of Hospa Breast Care Center and clinical professor of surgery at the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California, the conference held in Newport Beach, Calif, was sponsored by USC and supported by an educational grant from Ethicon Endo-Surgery Inc.

Among the participants was Debub Tripathy, an oncologist at the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center. Tripathy reported, “One of the main conclusions of the panel is that there are too many excisional biopsies done to diagnose breast cancer when core needle biopsies are just as accurate but much less invasive.”

Tripathy noted that he and colleagues in the field have issued a plea urging patients in need of biopsies to be seen at experienced centers where proper imaging and biopsy techniques are available. While roughly half of breast cancers can now be detected via mammogram and other imaging techniques, signs are often small and require further diagnostic steps such as biopsy. A report published in the December 2010 issue of the Journal of the American College of Surgeons states that 35 percent of such biopsies performed in the United States still involve unnecessary open surgical techniques.

Tripathy and Silverstein are scheduled to participate in the American Society of Breast Diseases Meeting on April 16, 2010, in New York. More information on that forum can be found at www.asbd.org.

**Oncologists re-examine best biopsy practices**

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Calendar of Events
This month events can be seen at www.usc.edu/hscp/calendar for the Health Sciences Campus community

Monday, Nov. 23

Tuesday, Nov. 24
9 a.m. Neurology Grand Rounds. “Strokes,” Askild Brunso, Medical Colofge of Georgia. ZNI 112. Info: (323) 442-7686

Wednesday, Nov. 25
Noon. “Uric Acid and Renal Disease,” Dalilis Corry, UCLA. GSN 4420. Info: (323) 226-7307

Monday, Nov. 30


Tuesday, Dec. 1
11 a.m. 2009 World AIDS Day Health Fair. LAG=USC Breezeway. Info: (323) 343-8258


Wednesday, Dec. 2


Thursday, Dec. 3

Friday, Dec. 4
9 a.m. Southern California Research Center for ALPD and Cirrhosis and UCSC Diabetes and Endocrinology Research Center Joint Symposium. “Mechanisms of Liver Metabolism and Fatty Liver,” Various speakers. MCH 149. Info: (323) 442-3121


Saturday, Dec. 5
8 a.m. RSM Continuing Medical Education Seminar. “Breast Cancer Update: State of the Art for the Primary Physician,” Various speakers. NRT Anesly Ais. Info: (323) 442-2555

Tuesday, Dec. 8
8 a.m. Pathology and Laboratory Medicine Grand Rounds. “Inflammatory Skin Diseases for the General Surgical Patholo- gist,” Mark Wiick, Univ. of Virginia Health System. NOR 7409. Info: (323) 442-1180

10:30 a.m. University Hospital Guild Holiday Luncheon. “Overlapping Drugs,” Kathy Basmian, USC. USN Inpatient Call. Info: (323) 254-0600

Noon. Cancer Center Grand Rounds. “mRNA: Their Develop- ing Role in Prostate Cancer,” Ralph De Vere White, USC. NRT Anesly Aud. Info: (323) 965-9601

Professional clothing sought for clothing drive to benefit job seekers

By Leslie Ridgeway

“The job will be very demanding, I express my appreciation,” said Pete Delgado, LAC+USC Medical Center CEO, addressing a group of about 50 physicians and employees celebrating the one-year anniversary of the opening of the new LAG=USC facility.

On Nov. 7, 2008, patients were moved from the more than 100-year-old County Hospital and Women’s and Children’s Hospital to the new 600-bed facility, which officially opened for business on Nov. 8. More than two years of in- tensive planning preceded the move, which was facilitated by hospital staff, Emergency Medical Services, Navy and Air Force personnel, as well as more than 1,000 volunteers from local county facilities, Delgado said.

To underscore the growth of the new LAG=USC, Supervisor Gloria Molina introduced Arianna Estrella Villaverde, a one-year-old girl who was the first baby born at the hospital.

“I’m very proud of LAG=USC,” said Supervisor Molina. “After many years of planning and construction, we now have the very best, cutting-edge facility available to the public.”

Molina noted that the hospital is too small and overcrowded, but stressed that she was not critical of hospital staff and physicians. “We will overcome that because we have a dedicated group of people here,” she said.

Philip Lumb, president of the medical staff, praised the partnerships that have sustained the hospital, as well as the “unique interac- tion of learning and community” that exists at LAG=USC.

Lumb quoted the Eastern philosopher Lao Tzu, who noted, “We hammer wood for a house, but it is the inner space that makes it livable … We work with being, but non-being is what we use.”

Lumb continued: “The magic of LAG=USC is the ‘non-being’ that brings these remarkable individuals together to create a powerhouse of health care.”

Supervisor Molina then cut one of four cakes for the event, which were decorated with photos of LAG=USC and USC.

John Shunhoff, interim director of the County of Los Angeles Department of Health Services, also spoke at the event. The Bravo High School Band provided entertainment.

In case of an emergency...

Call the Emergency Information Phone: 213-740-9233. The emergency telephone can handle 1,400 simultaneous calls. It also has a backup system on the East Coast.

Visit the USC Web: http://emergency.usc.edu This page will be activated in case of an emergency. Backup Web servers on the East Coast will function if the USC servers are incapacitated.

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LAC+USC fetes new facility’s anniversary

By Leslie Ridgeway

“For all the work you have done, I express my appreciation,” said Pete Delgado, LAC+USC Medical Center CEO, praising the hard work and dedication of the physicians and staff members of the year-old LAC+USC Replacement facility at a Nov. 7 celebration.

LAC+USC fetes new facility’s anniversary

By Leslie Ridgeway

The Southeast L.A.-Crenshaw Work Source Center, USC Employee Recruitment Services and USC Civic and Community Relations have launched a clothing drive to help local residents prepare for job interviews and give them confidence as they settle into new jobs. The drive, which runs through Dec. 18, seeks donations of clean, gently used items of professional clothing such as suits, shirts, blouses and skirts. Job seekers also need slacks, belts, ties, purses and other accessories that are suit- able for the work environment. Clothing can be dropped off on Thursdays and Fridays during the drive period at KAM 420. For more information, call (323) 442-3572.

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