Conti to become president of the USC Academic Senate

For the first time in university history, the president of USC’s Academic Senate will be an M.D. Peter Conti, director of the USC PET Imaging Science Center and professor of radiology at the Keck School of Medicine, will be installed as president of the Academic Senate on July 1.

The Academic Senate is the primary governing body of the university faculty from both the University Park Campus and the Health Sciences Campus.

“I have a wonderful opportunity to bridge the gap and improve relationships between faculty from both campuses and encourage interdisciplinary activities, whether that’s in research, teaching or just socialization,” said Conti.

“There is a great opportunity to represent the Keck School and increase its presence among the various schools and units. I have a unique responsibility to do that.”

Bringing eight years of past experience as a member of the senate, Conti will serve as president of the senate for a one-year term. He follows outgoing president Alex Capron, Scott H. Bice Chair in health care law, policy and ethics at the Gould School of Law and Keck School of Medicine.

“The Keck School of Medicine faculty, staff, students and I are very proud of Dr. Conti and his election as president of the USC Academic Senate,” said Keck School Dean Carmen A. Puliafito. “The election of a physician is an historic accomplishment, and his leadership will be visible at an historic time in USC history, with a new president assuming leadership of the University. Dr. Conti’s new role will help to strengthen the links between our Keck School of Medicine faculty and the rest of USC.”

Comprised of faculty leaders from all schools within the university, the Academic Senate works with administration to develop policies and procedures related to faculty life. In cooperation with the Office of the Provost and deans from around the university, the Academic Senate works to mitigate serious grievances and policies related to relationships with outside industry.

“We want to do is create a positive environment where issues can be resolved effectively and to people’s satisfaction,” said Conti.

“We try to work through system problems and fix those policies and procedures that aren’t correct.”

Conti has identified four key goals for his term: Continue to strengthen faculty wellness programs that provide incentives for healthy lifestyle choices; improve university-wide research administration practices to create a more productive and effective infrastructure and increase research grant success; grow the culture for mentoring young faculty members, postdoctoral researchers and teachers; reinvestigate the Medical Faculty Assembly by increasing engagement and participation among Keck School faculty members.

Conti’s most visible role as president of the Academic Senate may be during the upcoming inauguration of USC’s next president, C. L. Max Nikias. Conti will lead the procession into the ceremony holding the mace, representing the role of the faculty in university life.

“This is an exciting opportunity—university inaugurations only happen every 10 to 20 years or so,” said Conti. “I have two hoods—Ph.D. hood and my green M.D. hood, and I’m debating which one to wear. I think I’ll wear my green one to make it clear that this is something different.”

USMLE scores continue to climb at Keck School

By Ryan Ball

Keck students’ mean scores on the U.S. Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) Part 1 continue on an upward trajectory, nosing well above the national average. When the final scores from 2009 recently came in, the average score for Keck’s class of 2011 reached 235, while the national mean hovered at 221.

Keck students first began to break away from the pack in 2001 after the school implemented a new, fully integrated curriculum. Since then, their USMLE scores have improved from year to year, finally hitting a plateau in 2007 and 2008. Just when they seemed to be leveling off, they shot up again.

According to Allan Abbott, dean for curriculum and associate dean for Continuing Education at the Keck School, the students are simply better prepared for the test now.

“USMLE scores and other national rankings are probably the most important measure of the quality of our medical education, and the progress of our students is truly remarkable,” said Abbott.

While the USMLE is an important measure of quality medical education, it is only one of a variety of factors that are taken into account in assessing the performance of students and the school. Other factors include student retention, graduation rates, and the success of graduates in achieving residency positions.

The Keck School of Medicine of USC is committed to providing a world-class medical education that prepares graduates to become leaders in the field of medicine. The school is dedicated to educating physicians who will be well-prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century and to be leaders in their fields.

By Tania Chatila

A rapid transportation program at USC University Hospital is gaining momentum.

The program, created in October, is designed to transfer critically ill patients to USC University Hospital for procedures or treatments that cannot be provided at their hospital of origin.

Ray Matthews, professor of clinical medicine at the Keck School of Medicine, was integral in launching the program based on experience he had with similar initiatives at other hospitals. And now the program is seeing increased use, said Matthews.

“We are very satisfied with the utilization of this program, and we are confident it will only continue to grow over time,” said Matthews, adding that USC’s cardiovascular medicine, vascular surgery, cardiothoracic surgery and neurosurgery programs use the transportation service now.

As part of the program, USC University Hospital has contracted with a local ambulance company to provide transportation from Los Angeles-area hospitals, using a specially outfitted ambulance emblazoned with the hospital logo. A rapid admission process has also been created to ensure there are no delays in patient care.

“With this program came a large organizational effort on the part of the hospital to care for unexpected patients,” Matthews said. “We have taken this opportunity to integrate systems and learn how to work together for the greater good of the patient.”

Matthews said he hopes to further expand the program for response to urgent—but non-emergency—care throughout the Health Sciences Campus.

The USC PET (positron emission tomography) Imaging Science Center and professor of radiology at the Keck School of Medicine, will be installed as president of the Academic Senate on July 1.
Armed with da Vinci robot, surgeons can save face in complex cancer surgery

By Ryan Ball

The revolutionary da Vinci robot helps doctors save lives, but, crucially, it can also help spare a patient reconstructive surgery. USC University Hospit- al recently saw its first tran- soral robotic surgery (TORS), the first one performed on the West Coast, according to Niel Kok, assistant professor of otolaryngology, head and neck surgery, at the Keck School of Medicine. Kokot performed the surgery with Uram Sinha, assistant professor and vice chair of Otolaryngology, on March 22.

TORS was developed at the University of Pennsylvania, where Kokot trained for fellowship and gained experience in using the da Vinci robot to treat cancerous tumors. The operation in March was for resection of tonsillar carcinoma. Using the robotic arms and 3D visualization, the surgeons were able to gain ac- cess to an area of the body that usually requires extremely invasive measures. Kokot said that tumors of the tonsil and tongue base are generally removed via lip-splitting mandibulotomy, where surgeons splay open the entire jaw to get to the tumor. The procedure leaves facial scarring and a gaping hole between the neck and throat that requires reconstructive surgery involv- ing transplantation of a skin flap from the chest or arm.

“Going transorally allows us to avoid the need for those big reconstructions,” said Kokot. “The transoral robotic surgery patients have the potential to start eating within a few days after surgery, will stay in the hospital for a few days and generally are going to do much, much better.”

USC surgeons will soon use TORS for resection of tumors of the superglottic larynx and hypopharynx, while also treating sleep apnea with procedures such as tongue-base reduction. Kokot said that they’ll also be performing robotic thymectomies.

USC hospital employees split on representation by unions

By Tania Chatila

The results of a National Labor Relations Board election to determine representation for about 700 USC University Hospi- tal employees have been certified. The secret ballot election was held at USC University Hospital on May 26 and 27, and a majority of employees within the hospitals professional group voted against the union, while the majority of technical employees at USC University Hospi- tal voted in favor of representation by the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW).

On June 21, administrators of the USC hospitals received official notification from the board that those votes had been certified. The professional group is comprised of pharmacists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, social workers, speech therapists and clinical lab scientists. The technical group includes patient care techs, operating room techs and housekeeping staff, among others.

“I am grateful to everyone who took the time and energy to participate in a professional manner, and I respect your choices,” said hospitals CEO Mitch Creem in an e-mail sent to employees earlier this week. “Regardless of how you voted, we are one family. The USC hospitals continue to be committed to being an employer of choice, and we support and recognize the important contributions of our entire staff.”

With the election now certified, USC will begin processing benefits for employees in the professional group. The leader- ship of the USC hospitals will also begin negotiating a contract with NUHW.

“As we work through the negotiations process, we will strive, in good faith, to find solutions that are fair to both sides,” Creem said.
School of Pharmacy professor tapped for leadership institute

Two new grants support research to improve brain cancer treatment

The Weekly NEWSMAKERS

A June 21 New York Times article quoted chief of the division of cardiovas-
cular medicine Leslie Saxon about new, implantable defibrillators that monitor heart information and transmit it to doctors and hospitals.

A June 21 Los Angeles Times article quoted profes-
sor of preventive medicine Malcolm Pike about the link between breast density and cancer risk.

A June 18 Wall Street Journal article quoted asso-
ciate professor of clinical medicine and director of cardiac electrophysiology David Cesario about a new medical device that freezes tiny portions of heart tissue to correct a condition involving faulty heartbeats.

A June 15 Wall Street Journal article quoted as-
sistant professor of clinical medicine Sharon Orange about why men don’t go to the doctor as often as women.

A June 7 New York Times article featured research by USC Norris breast surgeon Dennis Holmes and colleagues which found that a single dose of radiation, delivered directly to the site of a tumor right after breast cancer patients have lumpectomies, was as effective as the roughly six weeks of daily radiation that most women now endure. The Chicago Tribune and United Press International also quoted Holmes about the research.

A June 6 Los Angeles Times article highlighted research by associate profes-
sor of medicine and medical director of the USC Norris Cancer Hospital David Shinn and colleagues at the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center. In a trial of 40 patients with advanced bladder cancer, the team found that 42 percent had significant tumor shrink-
age in response to a new experimental drug derived from sea sponges.

A June 2 Los Angeles Times article cited an editor-
ial written by chief of the division of endocrinology and program director of the General Clinical Research Center Thomas Buchanan that accompanied a new study in the journal Lancet. The new research suggests that a combination of low doses of the diabetes drugs Avandia and metformin can reduce the progression to Type 2 diabetes by two-thirds in people who are at high risk of developing the dis-
eas. Reuters and Bloomberg News also cited the editorial.

On June 1, NBC’s “The Today Show” interviewed asso-
ciate professor of medicine and chief, division of gen-
entic, hospital and general internal medicine David Goldstein about a run who was excommunicated for supporting a life-saving abor-
tion at an Arizona hospital.
U.S. News & World Report names CHLA to ‘Honor Roll’

For the second consecutive year, Childrens Hospital Los Angeles is one of only seven children’s hospitals in the nation ranked in all 10 pediatric specialties and named to the national “Honor Roll” of children’s hospitals in the United States in the current U.S. News & World Report rankings released online on June 3. In addition, Childrens Hospital Los Angeles is the only pediatric medical center on the West Coast named to the Honor Roll.

Childrens Hospital Los Angeles physicians and scientists are on the faculty of the Keck School of Medicine of USC. “We congratulate Childrens Hospital Los Angeles for achieving this ranking two years in a row,” said Carmen M. Puliafito, dean of the Keck School of Medicine. “Our faculty physicians and researchers are proud to work in partnership with this world-class hospital. We look forward to many more opportunities to work together in the pursuit of saving and improving the lives of hundreds of children every year.”

The article on “America’s Best Children’s Hospitals” will be published in the August issue of U.S. News & World Report, available on newsstands in late July. The list of children’s hospitals to make the prestigious national Honor Roll for two consecutive years includes Childrens Hospital Los Angeles, Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, Children’s Hospital Boston, Texas Children’s Hospital in Houston, Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center, New York Presbyterian Morgan Stanley-Komansky Children’s Hospital and St. Louis Children’s Hospital-Washington University.

Childrens Hospital Los Angeles has been named among the best children’s hospitals in the nation since U.S. News & World Report began its ranking of children’s hospitals in 1990. The methodology for the rankings is a blend of reputation, clinical outcomes and care-related measures, including nursing, advanced technology, credentialing and other factors. The children’s hospitals were evaluated on a combination of opinions from pediatric specialists—the hospitals these specialists would recommend for the sickest children—along with data collected from a lengthy survey.

Most of the hospitals considered for these rankings are members of the National Association of Children’s Hospitals and Related Institutions. This is the second year the magazine has ranked children’s hospitals in 10 specialty areas. U.S. News & World Report invited 160 hospitals to complete its more than 60-page survey to be considered for ranking.

The survey was created and administered by RTI International. Complete rankings of children’s hospitals by specialties and more information about methodology are available at www.usnews.com/childrenshospitals.

STAY FIT, EAT HEALTHFULLY—The Keck School of Medicine has pledged its support to The Teaching Garden, a Los Angeles-based organization designed to teach schoolchildren lessons about nutrition and physical fitness by establishing gardens at their schools. On June 21, Dean Carmen Puliafito, introduced by the Trojan Band, encouraged Nevin Elementary School students to pay attention to what they eat and get some exercise every day. “Healthy eating is the key to good health,” he said. “Eat your vegetables!” Also at the event (clockwise from top), volunteer Garrett Reppenhagen instructs students on how to plant and care for herbs and vegetables in the garden; chef and nutritionist Mary Salet teaches children about food; and health and food preparation; “Curb Your Enthusiasm” actress Cheryl Hines discusses the day’s events with Michael O’Gorman, founder of the Farmer-Veteran Coalition; professional volleyball player Gabrielle Reece (left) leads several hundred youngsters in a physical workout; Puliafito dances with characters from the upcoming movie “Despicable Me,” who were on hand to encourage children to stay active and fit. Photos by Jon Rabideau.