C. L. Max Nikias becomes 11th president of USC

USC President C. L. Max Nikias became the 11th president of the university on Aug. 3, with his official inauguration ceremony set for Oct. 15. One of his first acts as president was to begin the search for a new provost, a vacancy created when Nikias was named president.

I believe this appointment is particularly critical at this juncture in USC’s history, as we embark on our journey to take the university into the ranks of undisputed elite universities,” he wrote in an e-mail message to all faculty and staff. The executive search firm Isaacson, Miller is assisting the university in its search. Elizabeth Garrett serves as interim senior vice president for academic affairs and provost during the search. Garrett, the Frances R. and John J. Duggan Professor of Law, Political Science and Public Policy, has served since 2005 as USC’s vice president of academic planning and budget.

Nikias has emphasized the growing financial importance to the university of the clinical enterprise.

With USC’s recent purchase of two hospitals, subsequent improvements to those hospitals, and the integration of a vast and complex faculty health care practice into USC’s fiduciary control, the health professions and medicine now contribute more than 50% of USC’s total annual operating budget, he stated in a recent memo. “This is an inevitable and welcome development. Consequently, I will continue examining the governing board of the USC Hospitals.”

Nikias also announced a search for the university’s first chief investment officer. “The search will be assisted by Houston Group, an executive search firm specializing in asset management professionals.”

Check out the new USC website http://www.usc.edu/ and learn more about plans for the inauguration of President C. L. Max Nikias at http://inauguration.usc.edu

Robertta Diaz Brinton honored with prestigious award from White House

By Kukla Vera

Robertta Diaz Brinton, director of the USC Science, Technology and Research Program, was presented with the prestigious 2010 Presidential Citizens Medal by President Barack Obama in a ceremony at the White House on Aug. 4.

“Whatever these citizens — what makes them special — is the determination they share to find a wrong and right it; to see a need and meet it; to recognize when others are suffering and take it upon themselves to make a difference,” said President Obama at the ceremony.

Considered among the nation’s highest civilian awards, the Presidential Citizens Medal recognizes citizens who have performed exemplary deeds of service for the nation. Twelve other citizens were honored along with Brinton, having been chosen from a pool of some 6,000 applicants.

Brinton, who holds the R. Pete VanderVeen Chair in Therapeutic Discovery and Development in the USC School of Pharmacy, was recognized for work in improving science and technology education for students in Los Angeles through the USC Science, Technology And Research Program, known as STAR, for fast 22 years. The STAR program provides elementary, middle and high school students and their teachers with unique access to tools and that are structured to engage the students in science.

“I am very grateful for this honor,” said Brinton. “And I especially want to thank USC President Nikias, President Emeritus Sample and School of Pharmacy Dean R. Pete VanderVeen for their support of this program and its outreach into our community.”

A cornerstone of the STAR program is the opportunity for high school students to become working members of research teams in labs throughout USC. As an embedded portion of their secondary school curriculum, these students are in the lab daily, conducting experiments, using research technologies and even working on journal articles. Ultimately, the experience gives these students a high-level science background, which gives them stellar experiential training when applying to colleges and, in many, igniting a lifelong interest in science and in mentoring future generations.

Emmi Oji, a STAR graduate who is now a physician, said, “As a STAR student, I learned to work not according to the clock, but according to what needed to be done to succeed. I recall asking myself why I was in a research laboratory working on assays until 3 a.m., while my fellow high school students were sleeping. However, I

Leaders review health reform effects on clinical enterprise

By Katie Neith

Health care reform at the USC Academic Medical Center may be in the hands of our own faculty and executive leadership. Two national authorities in health care reform spoke at a leadership summit on July 19 to outline considerations for the future of the USC clinical enterprise in relation to health care reform. Quality measures were among key issues discussed at “The Changing Health Care Landscape” event for clinical leaders from the USC hospitals and the Keck School of Medicine.

“There are some real opportunities for us to look at the new laws … and take advantage of some new things that are in the laws,” said Vaughn Starnes, chair of the Department of Surgery at the Keck School and surgeon-in-chief at USC Norris Cancer Hospital and USC University Hospital. “The objective of this conference is to get us thinking about what this train looks like that is coming toward us. I’d rather be a rider than be on the tracks.”

Attended by approximately 50 faculty and staff, the day-long summit was organized by Starnes, who is also executive director of the USC Cardiovascular Thoracic Institute and the H. Russell Smith Chair for Cardiovascular Research at Keck, to examine how health care reform will affect USC and how hospital leaders can work to implement effective solutions to the upcoming changes and challenges.

“I am very grateful to Dr. Vaughn Starnes for his own wisdom and foresight in organizing a summit such as this one,” said USC President C. L. Max Nikias, who kicked off the day’s activities. “Today we stop to look carefully at how the health care landscape is shifting right before our eyes. We must become wise interpreters of uncertainty, translating uncertainty into possibility.”

The morning session featured plenary sessions by David Katz, an executive director at The Advisory Board Company, which provides performance improvement services to the health care and education sectors, and Jeffrey Rich, former director of the Center for Medicare Management during the Bush Administration. Katz spoke about how to prepare the USC health system for new payment methodologies and incentives and encouraged investing today for tomorrow’s payment system.

“Investments and relationships that support us now in the emerging pay-for-performance role will also prepare us for overarching payment reform,” said Katz. He pointed to four key actions that will assist in managing any type of payment reform — engaging active medical staff,
Keck School donation keeps high school Med COR program alive

By Leslie Ridgeway

A nearly 40-year-old USC program designed to help high school students in underserved areas of Los Angeles County will remain open with a joint donation of $150,000 from the Keck School of Medicine and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD).

The program, Med COR (Medical Counseling, Organizing and Recruiting), was established in 1970 by John Davis, Med COR director and professor of pediatrics at the Keck School. The goal then—to help students of color get the education, exposure and experience they need to take on careers in the health professions—has not changed; even though the reduction of funding will affect how many students can participate in the program.

The Keck School, under the direction of Dean Carmen A. Puliafito, will donate $75,000 to the program, which LAUSD will match.

“We’ve helped more than 4,000 kids since Med COR was founded,” said Davis. “Some of the parents were crying because they know how important this program is and don’t want to lose it. I’m happy that Dean Carmen Puliafito came forward with support. That institutional support speaks volumes to parents.”

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The program has helped middle school and high school students at hundreds of L.A.-area schools with tutoring in science, math and English, as well as personal exposure to health care professionals and professions. Drastic cuts were made to the program earlier this year as the LAUSD experienced budget difficulties due to state reductions. The program formerly had a budget of nearly $500,000.

“This program has helped thousands of young people not only make a decision to enter the medical profession, but also to get the education and motivation they need to apply to top universities,” said Puliafito. “Med COR must be sustained to continue to give that opportunity to these kids.”

The Keck School has provided in-kind support to the program in the past, arranging for seminars and tutoring sessions to take place in USC buildings for no cost, said Davis.

The program was launched July 19 in an effort to enhance patient safety. Interruption free zones, areas that are free from distraction—in 6-North and 6-West—mean we can’t come up with great ideas to refine the process. I am excited to tabulate the data and speak with some of the ancillary departments to see what effect this process has had on patient safety.”

The interruption free zone pilot study is expected to last between four and six weeks, and results will be reported through the Performance Improvement Committee.

The interruption free zone pilot study was launched by the Medication Administration Safety Team. This group was formed by the Nurses of USC to address interruptions during medication preparation and administration—an issue that affects hospitals across the country. A 2006 study of the National Institute of Medicine found that 1.5 million preventable medication errors occur annually in the United States.

“Medication errors are not uncommon in hospital settings,” said nurse manager Daniel Hudson, who has been leading the pilot study. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t come up with innovative ways to minimize those errors. Many of the nurses have been enthusiastic about this study and have come up with great ideas to refine the process. Since launching the pilot study, we’ll be able to work with 400,” said Davis.

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If significant strides were made in minimizing medication errors as a result of the study, interruption free zones could eventually be implemented throughout the USC hospitals.

The interruption free zone pilot program was launched July 19 in an effort to enhance accuracy and safety during the administration of medication. It involves the establishment of interruption free zones—areas that are free from intrusion or distraction—in 6-North and 6-West. These areas are clearly marked with signs, and neon yellow sashes or vests identify nurses who are in the process of administering medications.

As part of the study, these nurses are not to be interrupted while wearing the neon yellow sash or vest unless there are questions about the medications being administered or there is an emergency.

Since launching the pilot program and implementing the interruption free zones, employees and managers in 6-North and 6-West say the process is proving to be a positive learning experience.

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By Tania Chatila

It’s been three weeks since the start of a new pilot study at USC University Hospital, and employees are already responding with positive feedback.

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By Megan Levit

Researchers at the Keck School of Medicine have successfully transplanted blood stem cells modified to be resistant to HIV into mice, allowing the animals to control HIV infections.

If the approach can be translated to human patients, it would enable the long-term generation of HIV-resistant T cells in a patient’s body, and the potential for the patient’s own cells to suppress HIV.

The strategy is explained in a new study published online in the journal Nature Biotechnology.

This hybrid gene and stem cell therapy shows that it is possible to create HIV-resistant immune cells that can eventually win the battle against HIV in a living person.

“The goal is to create a therapeutic strategy that will not only control HIV replication but also to make the gene editing tool available to patients,” said principal investigator Paula Cannon, associate professor of molecular microbiology and immunology at the Keck School. “We’ve done it at the scale of a mouse, and the challenge now is to see if this can be done at the scale of a human patient.”

The approach targets a gene called CCR5, one of the two gateway molecules that HIV uses to enter human cells. Cannon’s strategy arose from the observation that people with a mutation in a gene called CCR5 are naturally resistant to infection with the most common strains of HIV and do not develop AIDS.

The team used enzymes called zinc finger nucleases—which physically cut DNA—to knock out the CCR5 gene in human blood stem cells. The researchers transplanted these modified stem cells into mice, where they developed into mature cells of the human immune system, including the T cells that HIV infects. When the researchers then infected the animals with HIV, they found that the mice were able to maintain normal levels of the human T cells and suppress HIV to very low levels, unlike control mice that received unmodified stem cells.

Cannon’s preliminary data on the ability of this anti-CCR5 therapy to control HIV replication has formed the basis of a collaboration between USC, lead institution City of Hope National Medical Center and the biotech company Sangamo BioSciences Inc., which makes the gene-editing technology.

The team received $14 million last year from the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine to develop this novel therapy further in the hope that it may offer lifetime immunity to HIV infection. The grant was awarded as part of the Disease Team Research Awards, aimed at speeding the process of bringing stem cell therapies to clinical trials.

“By engineering CCR5-deficient stem cells, we may allow a patient to produce HIV-resistant cells in all of the cell types that the virus infects and for long periods of time,” Cannon said. “If successful, it could open the door to allow patients to control their HIV without needing to take antiretroviral drugs.”

USC researchers create HIV-resistant immune cells in mice

Continued from Page 1

standardizing care processes, tracking and analyzing performance and leveraging physician incentives.

Rach provided an overview on transforming U.S. health care delivery, and care at USC hospitals, from a volume-driven system to a value-driven system.

“Nobody has to be amazed that USC can create your own personalized program,” said Rach, who outlined different ways some health institutions have piloted value-based payment systems using quality measures.

In the afternoon, Mark Amey, chief technology officer for the USC Health Sciences Campus, outlined plans for the IT transformation that will take place here over the next few years, including the creation of electronic medical records. Attendees also participated in a Q&A and discussion session.

Mitch Creem, CEO of the USC-owned hospitals, expressed excitement about the role the USC hospitals can play in shaping future federal reimbursement policy, the future role of an academic medical center in the design of accountable care organizations, the plans to implement vitaly important IT programs and the opportunities to actively participate in cultivating physician relationships into a regional referral network.

“I am optimistic about the expansive challenges that lie ahead as health care reform begins to take shape,” concluded Minor Anderson, CEO of The Doctors of USC.

REFORM: USC hospitals look to adapt payment systems in light of health care reform changes

On Aug. 6, KPCC-FM interviewed Roberta Diaz Brinton of the USC School of Pharmacy about receiving a Presidential Citizens Medal. USA Today, KABC News and ABC News affiliate WZZM-TV also reported on Brinton’s award.

An Aug. 5 Neurona.org article quoted Flora L. Thorn- ton, Chair of the Department of Preventive Medicine, and Jonathan Samet about Interphone, a study organized by the World Health Organization’s International Agency for Research on Cancer to research the health effects of cell phones.

An Aug. 4 San Gabriel Valley Tribune article reported that a nearly 40-year-old USC program designed to help high school students in underserved areas of Los Angeles County will remain open due to a joint donation from the Keck School of Medicine and the Los Angeles Unified School District.

An Aug. 2 Los Angeles Times article quoted assistant professor in the Department of Preventive Medicine Adam Leventhal about the use of electronic cigarettes.

‘A Concert to Cure Cancer’ event to raise funds for USC Norris

On Aug. 7, 360x3600 interviewed Rachel D’Amico of the USC School of Pharmacy about the release of a new study. The study was reported as D’Amico, who was accompanied by hospitals CEO Mitch Creem and other guests at the match-up between the Dodgers and the New York Mets. Heretol received an acne valve replacement last year at USC University Hospital and is a part of a study that led to the procedure. He is also a USC alum, having formerly played football and baseball for the University.

A July 29 HealthDay News article quoted professor of clinical surgery and chief of the division of surgical oncology at USC Norris Stephen Sener about analyzing the genetic makeup of breast cancer tumors.

On July 28, Fox 11 News featured USC Norris breast surgeon Dennis Halton and a one-day breast cancer therapy offered at USC University Hospital that combines surgery and radiation.
Clinical trials successes highlighted at Phases of Hope event

By Katie Neith

Supporters of the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center and Hospital gathered in the Hindenberk Garden on June 23 to learn more about the importance of clinical trials.

Approximately 75 attendees of the “Phases of Hope” event met to hear the goals and accomplishments of the clinical trial program at USC Norris and to get a firsthand account of clinical trial participation from patients.

“Basic scientists can make monumental discoveries,” said Peter Jones, director of the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center. “Those discoveries don’t mean anything unless we can actually test them in various ways and, ultimately, test them in patients who volunteer to really help in making cancer a disease of the past.”

Several patients who have enrolled in clinical trials at USC Norris also spoke about their positive experiences. Janice Hall, who was diagnosed in 2006 with Stage IV colon cancer, is now free of disease and has become a fundraiser for clinical trials at USC Norris.

“The key to curing this disease is research and research involves clinical trials,” said Hall. “I stand here today, three years and three weeks cancer-free. I am living proof that clinical trials work.”

A variety of investigators exhibited posters around the garden about their research. Parkash Gill, professor of medicine and pathology at the Keck School and the Erazor Family Chair in Cancer Therapeutics, emphasized the importance of clinical trials to make advances in cancer therapies.

“I want recognize that making a medicine is not an individual process. It takes hundreds of people—scientists, clinicians and of course, most importantly, the patients,” said Gill.

Richard Merkin Distinguished Fellowship provides young doctors with international experiences

By Katie Neith

For Nico Forget, an interest in international and emergency medicine has had a strong influence on his life over the past 10 years. After completing a residency in emergency medicine at LAC+USC Medical Center in 2008, he was named the recipient of the second Richard Merkin Distinguished Fellowship in Emergency and Tropical Medicine—an honor that would take him around the world.

The Richard Merkin Distinguished Fellowship in Emergency and Tropical Medicine was established at the Keck School in 2006 by Richard Merkin, president and CEO of Heritage Provider Network.

“I have benefitted tremendously from the Richard Merkin Distinguished Fellowship in Emergency and Tropical Medicine,” said Forget. “Since I have been interested in international medicine for years, the fellowship was a way for me to formalize and expand my knowledge, as well as find a niche for me to be most useful.”

During the two-year fellowship, Forget travelled to Thailand, India, Peru, Chile, Vietnam and Haiti. He worked on TB programs, presented lectures, studied tropical medicine, taught emergency medicine residents, assisted in trauma training and led a team to Haiti after the devastating earthquake earlier this year.

Forget’s experience during the fellowship has led to a new position at Vanderbilt University, where he will build an emergency medicine residency program in Guyana.

“I feel very strongly that the fellowship has prepared me well for the position. I now have knowledge in tropical medicine, public health, emergency medicine and academics, all of which will be extremely valuable in Guyana,” he said. “The Merkin Fellowship has been an incredible opportunity and an amazing experience for which I am extremely grateful.”

Monica Kumar, an emergency medicine resident at LAC+USC from 2007 to 2010, is the current Richard Merkin Distinguished Fellow in Emergency and Tropical Medicine for 2010. She has a strong interest in international medical education and in addressing major issues such as HIV and tuberculous care in developing nations.

In case of an emergency...

Call the Emergency Information Phone: 213-740-9233 The emergency telephone system 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.

Calendar of Events

This Calendar of events is also online at www.usc.edu/hsccalendar for the Health Sciences Campus community

Tuesday, Aug. 17


Friday, Aug. 20

8:30 a.m. “Factors that Drive Claims and Risk Management: Focus on Quality Improvement and Patient Care,” LAC-USC County Council Panel. DOH 100. Info: (323) 442-2506

11 a.m. “Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma: An Update,” Anil Tulpule, USC. IPT C21803. Info (323) 442-7744

Saturday, Aug. 21


Tuesday, Aug. 24


Friday, Aug. 27

8:30 a.m. “Enhanced Recovery in Colorectal Surgery,” Anthony Senagore, USC. DOH 100. Info (323) 442-2506

11 a.m. “Disorders of Neutrophil Number and Function,” Howard Lieberman, USC. IPT C21803. Info (323) 442-7744

Friday, Sept. 10


Notice: Deadline for calendar submission is 4 p.m. Mon- day 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: 766 Weekly, (213) 440-2506 or fax to (323) 442-2832, or e-mail to eblaauw@usc.edu. Entries must include day, date, time, title of talk, first and last name of speaker, affiliation of speaker, location, and a phone number for information.