Donor gift creates new nursing award for USC hospitals

By Pauline Vu

When nurse Yesenia Gonzalez walked into the Norris Inpatient Tower Café on Sept. 20 to find her fellow nurses and other hospital personnel applauding her, she thought it was a celebration for her birthday, which was the previous week. Actually, her colleagues were celebrating the hospital’s first-ever nursing gift from a donor — made in Gonzalez’s honor. A former patient at USC University Hospital, Richard Heller, was so appreciative of Gonzalez’s care that he donated $25,000 to establish the Yesenia Gonzalez, R.N., Award for Excellence in Patient Care.

“I feel kind of like I’m in a dream, like it’s not real,” said Gonzalez, who was given a crystal bowl with an inscription recognizing the new award. “I’m honored—more than honored. I can’t believe the hospital would do all this just for me.”

Heller is a former USC faculty member who was so impressed with Gonzalez that he donated $27,000 to USC University Hospital’s general fund, $55,000 to support the research of Matthew Dunn, assistant professor of clinical medicine in urology, and $50,000 for the research of Michael Kline, associate professor of clinical medicine in urology, and $50,000 for the research of Michael Kline, associate professor of clinical medicine in urology.

Gonzalez is receiving $5,000 for being the person for whom the award was named. Then for the next four years, the winner of the Nurse of the Year Award, the top nursing honor at USC’s Hospitals, will also receive the Yesenia Gonzalez, R.N., Award for Excellence in Patient Care, along with a $5,000 prize.

The first award will be given in May at the annual Nurses Week Awards Ceremony. Nurses from both USC University Hospital and USC Norris Cancer Hospital are eligible.

In addition to the nursing gift, Heller also donated $27,000 to USC University Hospital’s general fund, $55,000 to support the research of Matthew Dunn, assistant professor of clinical urology, and $50,000 for the research of Michael Kline, associate professor of clinical medicine in gastroenterology and internal medicine.

Hospitals CEO Mitch Cream said Heller was pleased with the plan to name a top award after Gonzalez. “You do things from your heart without any expectation whatsoever,” Creem told her.

Creem added, “This gift shows how much our patients truly appreciate the selfless and compassionate acts of our nurses. Sometimes, we might feel that our hard work every day goes unnoticed. It really doesn’t.”

By Sara Reeves

Berislav V. Zlokovic, an internationally recognized leader in the research of Alzheimer disease and stroke from the University of Rochester Medical Center, has been appointed to the position of professor and chair of the Department of Physiology and Biophysics in the Keck School of Medicine, effective Dec. 15. Zlokovic has also been named the director of the new Center for Neurodegeneration and Regeneration at the Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute.

“Dr. Zlokovic returns to the Keck School after spending the last 11 years at the University of Rochester Medical Center in New York,” said Carmen A. Puliafito, dean of the Keck School of Medicine. “I know that, under his guidance, both the Department of Physiology and Biophysics and the Center for Neurodegeneration and Regeneration will continue to make great strides in the research and understanding of systems and molecular biology.”

Zlokovic comes to USC from the University of Rochester Medical Center, where he is a professor of neurosurgery and neurology and director of the Center for Neurodegenerative and Brain Vascular Disorders. He is also director of the Interdisciplinary Program in Dementia Research and Dean’s Professor.

“My role will be to enhance an already very strong neuroscience base and try to make USC the number one place in the neurosciences in the country and the world,” said Zlokovic. “It’s a big goal, but I think, with what’s going on right now, it’s actually moving in that direction. I think that could be my greatest contribution.”

See CHAIR, page 3

By Amy E. Hamaker

Tackling the issues surrounding global challenges to health care was the focus for Keck School of Medicine speakers at the 2011 USC Global Conference, held in Hong Kong Oct. 11–13.

“Terry Sanger, academic director of HTE@USC, Jonathan Samet, founding director of the USC Institute for Global Health, and Junfeng (Jim) Zhang, professor of environmental health, presented alongside experts in global technology, economics, the environment and governance to examine global shifts in these areas, and what those shifts might mean for the future.”

The National Academy of Engineering’s challenge of “reverse engineering,” the brain was the basis for the presentation by Sanger, who pondered its applications to health care, particularly personalized health care, in the 21st century. He also showcased technology being developed at USC labs for brain simulation, interface and repair.

“I think one of the most important reasons to concentrate on this area is that, so far, all the advances in neurological treatment have come from understanding structural and metabolic components of brain function, but not the data processing components—in other words, learning about the brain’s function hasn’t yet been important for treating human disease,” Sanger said. “This will change when we need to understand that function to build devices that interface directly with the brain and when we need to try to understand the effect of injury on brain function and recovery.”

Samet, professor and Flora Interdisciplinary Program in Dementia Research and Dean’s Professor. (See CHAIR, page 3)

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Keck School luminaries examine key health issues at USC Global Conference

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Primary Care Week highlights importance of diversity

By Ryan Ball
Felix Nunez grew up in a working class Los Angeles community. Now interim CEO and chief medical officer at Family Health Care Centers of Greater Los Angeles, he found a mentor in a family physician who inspired him not only to pursue medicine, but also to remember where he came from and to serve his community.

Nunez was one of four physicians who discussed “Diversifying the Face of Care” during Primary Care Week 2011.

For three days in September, Primary Care Week 2011 drew together the medical schools of USC, JUCLA and Charles Drew University with the goal of highlighting and celebrating the importance of primary care within communities.

“My vision is that I want to work with underserved populations on a program level and a policy level, really looking at how we deliver care to these populations,” Nunez said. He noted that the community health centers operate on a model in which patients are involved with running the clinic, even making up the majority of the board of directors.

“It made a lot of sense to me, from a democratic standpoint, that people who are poor shouldn’t just expect to get poor care.’

—Felix Nunez, interim CEO and chief medical officer at Family Health Care Centers of Greater Los Angeles

International firm lists USC’s stem cell research among best

The international business research & consulting firm Frost and Sullivan recently named the Eli and Edythe Broad Center for Regenerative Medicine and Stem Cell Research at USC among the five top academic and research venues for stem cell science in North America.

The group did not rank the five top performers, but stated the Broad Center and others listed represented “the best of the best” institutions performing stem cell research.

The others were: the University of Michigan, Wake Forest University School of Medicine, Harvard Medical School, and the City of Hope’s Beckman Research Institute.

“The list was published in Drug Discovery News.

Prostate Cancer 5k slated for Nov. 6

The USC Institute of Urology and USC Norris Cancer Hospital will host the 2nd annual LA Prostate Cancer 5k on Nov. 6 on the University Park Campus by Tommy Trojan.

All proceeds and donations from the event will be dedicated to prostate cancer research at USC. The 5K is open to all levels of runners, joggers and walkers. The race starts at 8:30 a.m.

For more information and to register, visit urology.usc.edu/prostate-5k.
CHAIR: Zlokovic returns to Keck School of Medicine as chair of Biophysics

Continued from page 1

His research accomplishments include contributions to the understanding of the pathogenesis of disorders of the brain, including contributions for development of new therapies; discovery of mechanisms in cerebral blood vessels mediating brain dysfunction in Alzheimer disease; discovery of new therapies for Alzheimer disease based on amyloid-beta clearance; and discovery of the protein C pathway in the brain that has therapeutic implications for stroke and neurological disorders.

He has received numerous awards for his research on Alzheimer disease and stroke, including the Potamkin Prize from the American Academy of Neurology, the Jarvis Award from the National Institute on Neurological Disorders and Stroke, and a MERIT Award from the National Institute on Aging. Webster H. Pitche, Frank P. Smith Professor and Chair, Department of Neurosurgery, University of Rochester Medical Center, said the University of Rochester Medical Center will feel the loss of a scientist of Zlokovic’s caliber.

“Dr. Zlokovic’s passion for scientific discovery and his earnest hope that patients will someday benefit from this work has inspired many here in Rochester and around the world,” said Pitche. “His intellectual leadership, his passion for transformational discovery, his indefatigable persona and of course his operatic talents will be sorely missed in Rochester. Rochester’s loss will be USC’s gain.”

Zlokovic is a prolific author, with more than 250 published articles in journals such as Nature Medicine, Nature Cell Biology, Nature Neuroscience, Nature Reviews Neuroscience, and Science.

Prior to his time at the University of Rochester Medical Center, Zlokovic spent 11 years at the Keck School of Medicine, the last eight as professor of neurosurgery, physiology and biophysics.

“I have great memories of my time at USC,” said Zlokovic. “It was a very interesting place to be when I first started my career in the U.S., and right now, the momentum that is building up—with the new president, new leadership, both on the University Park Campus and here at the medical school—is in my opinion, very unique. It’s a most dynamic environment.”

Zlokovic received his bachelor’s degree from Belgrade College of Sciences in what is now Serbia. For his medical degree and doctorate, he attended the University of Belgrade, where he also completed his residency in clinical neurology and intensive care. He completed fellowships in transport biology at Queen Elizabeth College in the United Kingdom, as well as in neurobiology and blood-brain barrier transport at King’s College London, and in neurobiology and transport physiology at St. Thomas’ Hospital London.

Zlokovic will be joined in Los Angeles by his wife, Zora Mihalovich, a renowned concert pianist. Their daughter, Anna, is a student at USC.

Richard Koch, USC researcher and medical pioneer, 89

Richard Koch, a former Keck School instructor, Children’s Hospital Los Angeles researcher and a medical pioneer who devoted much of his career to preventing disability, died Sept. 24 in Los Angeles. He was 89.

In 1951, Koch received his medical degree from the University of Rochester in New York. In 1955, Koch became the first director of the Clinic for the Study of Mental Retardation at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles. He pioneered mobile clinics that brought medical services to the disabled and led a landmark effort to screen and treat newborns for phenylketonuria (PKU), a hereditary metabolic disorder that can cause mental disability.

In an Oct. 13 article in LA Weekly featured a film screening sponsored by the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center of the movie 50/50, about a young man with cancer.

The story noted that Peter Jones, director of the cancer center and distinguished professor of urology and biochemistry & molecular biology at the Keck School, Prentice Chaudhary, associate director for translational research at the cancer center and professor of medicine at the Keck School, and Stuart Siegel, associate director for pediatric oncology at the cancer center and professor and vice chair of pediatrics at the Keck School, were on hand for the screening and question-and-answer session with the film’s stars.

It quoted Josh Liliestam and Darren Russell, USC medical students who survived cancer. An Oct. 6 article in the Los Angeles Times also covered the movie screening, noting that Siegel and Debu Tripathy, co-leader of the Women’s Cancer Program at USC Norris and professor of medicine at the Keck School, are developing an adolescent and young adult program for cancer patients ages 15 to 39. The program is a collaboration between Children’s Hospital Los Angeles and USC Norris.

An Oct. 11 article in Scientific American featured USC research on air pollution and its effects on health. The story, which also appeared in an Oct. 7 edition of Environmental Health News, quoted several Keck School faculty members including Edward Avol, professor of clinical medicine; Frank Gilliland, professor of preventive medicine; Andrea Bricks, professor of preventive medicine; and Heather Volk, assistant professor of research in the Department of Preventive Medicine. The story also highlighted the Southern California Environmental Health Sciences Center, a collaboration launched in 1996 by USC and University of California scientists to research issues related to air pollutants.

New graphic identity briefing slated for Oct. 27

Interested USC faculty and staff are invited to a briefing on the new graphic identity system to launch Nov. 1.

New brand names and logotypes for the Keck School of Medicine of USC, Keck Medical Center of USC, Keck Hospital of USC, USC Norris Cancer Hospital and USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center are among the names to be discussed. Attendees will learn how to use the new names and logos effectively and in compliance with University policy.

The briefing will take place on Thursday, Oct. 27, noon to 1:30 p.m., on the first floor of the Eli and Edythe Broad CIRM Center for Regenerative Medicine and Stem Cell Research at USC. Attendees are welcome to bring a lunch; cookies and sodas will be provided. Reserve your place online at usc.edu/esvp, code: logos.

The briefing is hosted by the USC Health Sciences PR and Marketing office.

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By Aishwarya Nukala

A team of researchers from Keck School of Medicine of USC-affiliated Children’s Hospital Los Angeles and City Of Hope has received a five-year, $2.5 million grant from the National Cancer Institute to establish a research center that will study drug resistance in pediatric cancer, particularly in childhood neuroblastoma. The center, headed by Yves A. DeClerck, professor of pediatrics and biochemistry/molecular biology at Keck School, would be one of 11 tumor microenvironment centers in the United States. Researchers with those centers hope to develop new techniques to identify cells that contribute to cancer progression and targeted therapies that can be tested in clinical trials in adult and pediatric cancers.

DeClerck’s team includes Keck School faculty members Robert Seeger, professor of pediatrics, and Shahal Aghazadeh, assistant professor of pediatrics, as well as Hua Yu and Richard Jove, both of the Beckman Research Institute at City of Hope. DeClerck, Seeger and Aghazadeh are members of The Saban Research Institute of Children’s Hospital Los Angeles. Cancer cells often retain the ability to proliferate and metastasize a second leading type of solid tumor in children with cancer. Neuroblastomas tumors initially develop in the peripheral nervous system of children who are typically 5 years of age and younger. Drug resistance is a major cause of failure to cure patients from cancer, including neuroblastoma.

The studies that will be initiated by the center are based on the hypothesis that the bone marrow, which is a common site of metastasis in neuroblastoma, provides a unique microenvironment within the body that protects the cancer cells from the effects of chemotherapy. Researchers believe that normal cells in the bone marrow contribute, in tumor cells, specific signaling pathways that promote the survival of the neuroblastoma cells and allow them to replicate into drug-resistant offspring. The growth of drug-resistant cancer cells in the bone marrow contributes to cancer progression, and thereby significantly lowers the rate of long-term disease-free survival for the patient. The center’s goal is to test, in pediatric clinical trials, agents that can interfere with these pathways and prevent the development of drug resistance. "By inhibiting pathways activated by normal cells in the tumor microenvironment responsible for drug resistance, we will provide a new paradigm that will result in improved survival not only for children with neuroblastoma, but also for children and adults with other types of cancer," DeClerck said.

This National Cancer Institute Tumor Microenvironment Network grant builds on previous collaborative work funded by The T. J. Martell Foundation and the Richard Call Family Endowed Chair in Pediatric Research Innovation that is currently held by DeClerck.

USC researcher awarded pediatric eye cancer grant

By Ellin Kavanagh

Susan Lee, assistant professor of research in the Department of Pathology at the Keck School of Medicine, was awarded a Knight-Temple Eye Foundation grant for her study on “The Role of Survivin in Retinoblastoma: Implications for Therapy.”

Lee conducts her research at Keck School affiliate Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, home to The Saban Research Institute, one of the largest and most productive pediatric research facilities in the United States. Retinoblastoma is the most common form of eye cancer in children ages 5 and younger. The survival rate is 90 percent in developed countries, but in certain advanced cases, the cancer can reoccur after the patient appears to be cured. A relapse often results in removal of the affected eye or spread of the disease.

Lee’s study seeks to understand the role of a specific protein, survivin, in the relapse cases of retinoblastoma. Survivin prevents cell death and can be found at higher levels in cancer cells. Theoretically, the elevated levels provide cancer tissues with some degree of immunity from chemotherapy treatments. Lee’s work investigates the levels of survivin in retinoblastoma cells and also aims to decrease the chances of relapse by suppressing the protein with an inhibitor drug. "Our overall aim is to propose a new treatment that will lower the rate of relapse in retinoblastoma," said Lee.

The Weekly

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 The Weekly, KAM 400 or fax to (323) 442-2822, or email to椭椭blau@usc.edu. Entries must include date, time, title of event, place and last name of speaker, affiliation of speaker, and a phone number for information.