Buitrago named to Keck Medical Center of USC leadership team

By Josh Grossberg

USC researchers and their partners across Los Angeles County have been awarded an $11 million grant to fund research on community-based interventions to reduce the higher rates of stroke and death from stroke among economically disadvantaged Hispanics, African-Americans and Asian-Americans.

The Los Angeles Stroke Prevention/Intervention Research Centers (LASCAPRIC) is a multi-partnered research center, funded by the National Institutes of Health. The center, led by Barbara Vickrey, professor of neurology at UCLA, will conduct two randomized, controlled community-based trials to test prevention interventions.

Amyris Towfighi, assistant professor of neurology at the Keck School of Medicine of USC and associate chief medical officer of Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center, will co-lead the larger trial in the five-year study.

“The reason we’re targeting this population is because minorities are at high risk for stroke and are less likely to receive appropriate stroke preventive services than whites,” Towfighi said. “We plan to bridge this gap.”

Towfighi’s efforts, Secondary Stroke Prevention by Uniting Community and Chronic Care Model Teams Early to End Disparities (SUCCEED), is a randomized controlled trial of an intervention that teams community health workers with physicians and care managers at Los Angeles medical centers serving low-income populations.

“The community health workers will serve as a liaison between patients and the health care system; will target patients’ lifestyle habits, self-management skills and medication adherence; and will assess for social isolation and depression,” Towfighi said.

“The overall goal is to improve risk factor control among individuals who have had a stroke or transient ischemic attack.”

Commonly known as a “mini-stroke,” a transient ischemic attack refers to the temporary disturbance of the blood supply to the brain, which often results in brain damage. Common causes are blood clots and the temporary blockage of a blood vessel by a plaque.

Carol’s is a critical new role for our organization, as we work to develop professional relationships with other community providers and industry partners, and as we work to position the Keck Medical Center of USC as a health care leader in Southern California,” said Shawn Sheffield, the medical center’s chief strategy and system development officer, to whom Buitrago reports. “She will work closely with administrators and physicians, and she will play a key part in solidifying our fiscal well-being through patient volume growth, ensuring rewarding reimbursements and maximizing our hold on the region’s health care market.”

Buitrago will be responsible for cultivating new relationships with external providers and payors, and for negotiating new contracts with outside organizations to best meet the medical center’s goals for growth and expansion. She will lead the development of a robust managed care strategy to ensure long-range financial goals. Buitrago will also be responsible for developing a new reimbursement structure for the medical enterprise, of neurology at UCLA, will conduct two randomized, controlled community-based trials to test prevention interventions.

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New research elucidates a complex gene regulatory circuit

By Candace Pearson

Piece by missing piece, scientists at the Keck School of Medicine of USC are deciphering the powerful gene regulatory circuit that maintains and controls the potential of embryonic stem cells (ESCs) to form any type of cell in the body.

Recent findings by Andrew McMahon, director and Provost Professor, and Qilong Yang, associate professor of cell and neurobiology, at the Eli and Edythe Broad Center for Regenerative Medicine and Stem Cell Research at USC, underscore the essential role of basic science in paving the way for future medical breakthroughs.

McMahon and Yang are in pursuit of the ways in which the intricate regulatory circuit balances two qualities of stem cells: pluripotency—the capacity to develop into any type of cell—and differentiation (the process of becoming different types of cells).

The scientists are particularly interested in signaling pathways, important routes for intracellular communication. Left to their own devices, ESCs rapidly grow to the next step and become specific types of cells.

“We want to freeze the cells at that normally transient stage, so they are more compatible for use in any clinical situation,” said McMahon, who holds the W. M. Keck Professorship in Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine at the Keck School.

In a study published in the March 15 issue of Stem Cells, McMahon’s team focused on the Wnt signaling pathway, one of the first pathways activated in human development. This network of proteins helps determine what a cell will become; it also is over-stimulated in colon cancer and other tumors.

Intriguingly, the Wnt pathway is linked to maintenance and differentiation of ESCs—to both stalling their evolution and encouraging it—what McMahon calls “paradoxical actions.” His team’s findings zeined in on one component in that process: transcription factor T-cell factor-3, or Tcf-3. Transcription factors are proteins that bind to DNA and control the flow of genetic information.

Working in the lab with mouse and human complex bioinformatics, investigators found Tcf-3 was instrumental in destabilizing the stem cells. Equally important, beta-catenin—a multifunctional protein that activates Wnt target genes in the cell nucleus—can block Tcf-3’s ability to short-circuit the stem cells.

McMahon’s experiments rely on groundbreaking research by Ying, published in Nature in 2008. That research showed that ESCs could be cultured in the lab indefinitely and kept from differentiating, provided that two molecules were added to the medium in which the cells were kept.

Ying also has based his 2008 study. In research published in the March 1 issue of Journal of Cell Science, Ying and his team analyzed anomalous signaling pathway—LIF/STAT3 (leukemia inhibitory factor)—in the maintenance of stem cells.

The researchers screened 19 genes and identified an important downstream target, a protein called Gbx2, which allows capabilities of supporting stem cell self-renewal. What remains is a sort of genetic jigsaw puzzle. “We have another missing piece, but we know there are many more to come,” Ying said. “The clinical applications of such investigations may not be far behind. At the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center, a clinical trial is now underway to study the first drug designed to specifically target and inhibit the LIF/STAT3 signaling pathway. “The goal—is to impede the growth of cancer cells,” Ying said. “This is a strong example of how basic work in cell biology can lead to new thinking in how to treat patients,” McMahon said.

By Josh Grossberg

Designing, Discovering and Delivering Change, was in part a response to First Lady Michelle Obama’s call last year to encourage more girls and women to study STEM subjects.

The statistics show why it is so important—while women make up 48 percent of the workforce, they hold only 24 percent of STEM jobs. And there is a growing need since she called for skilled workers in STEM fields.

Speakers included Michele D. Kipke, professor of pediatrics and preventive medicine at the Keck School; Roberta Diaz Brinton, USC School of Pharmacy professor of pharmacology and pharmaceutical sciences, biomedical engineering and co-lead in the Keck School.

Volk, associate professor of research in the division of environmental health in the Department of Preventive Medicine and the Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute; and Maja Mataric, professor of computer science and vice dean for research at the USC Viterbi School of Engineering.

There was also a panel discussion led by Cheryl Sahar. She and her husband, Haim, gave a transformational gift a decade ago that resulted in The Sahar Research Institute being named to honor them.

Diaz Brinton shared with the audience her own challenging childhood experience. “I took on problems bigger than I was,” she said. “What I learned served me well as a scientist. I can’t give up. ’That’s not an option. ’”

Volk advised the audience to develop relationships with others—to become part of a team. “That support, those groups really mean a lot to me in my research,” she said. “I couldn’t do it by myself.”

She said that she found support when she was working on someone else’s team. And now that she’s forming her own research team, she finds the same solace.

“The great part of this collaboration is the people I’m working with are my peers,” she said. “And I think for women in STEM fields, myself especially, working with girls has been really incredible for me.”

Mataric told the group that it was OK to make mistakes along the way. “Nobody is perfect,” she said. “Women are just more open and worry more about it than men. Since you’re not perfect, embrace the imperfections you can live with.”

She told the group that it’s normal to feel insecure, but to push ahead anyway.

Mataric left the audience with a question to ask oneself in challenging situations. “What would you do if you weren’t scared?”

The event ended with an energizing and inspiring panel discussion on topics such as unconscious biases, mentoring, letting go of perfection and embracing failure.
By Ina Fried
Images of shrinking glaciers and stranded polar bears give powerful evidence of the need for people to work together to protect the planet. Adding art and the voices of community leaders to the data scientists are compiling may help convince decision makers to take action to deal with climate change, said Jonathan Samet, director of the USC Institute for Global Health. Samet spoke on challenges and opportunities in arts and health care and the need for stewardship of the planet at an Earth Day Forum on April 22 at Los Angeles City Hall. The forum, “Aging People/Aging Planet: The Face of Climate Change—Local and Global Perspectives,” was the USC Institute for Genetic Medicine’s seventh annual Global Environment Forum. It was organized by a steering committee chaired by Muriel Wood and BK Rao in collaboration with Sister Cities of Los Angeles Inc. and the gallery’s public, private, nonprofit/faith-based, academic and media partners.

Pointing to examples of air pollution from traffic in Beijing and from indoor cooking fuels and diesel vehicles in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Samet said, “Now, the air pollution of Beijing and Addis is everybody’s problem—an on-going global threat. At 7 billion, we have exceeded the absorptive capacity of the planet, polluting one of our global commons—the atmosphere.”

Yet Samet, the Flora L. Thornton Chair of the Department of Preventive Medicine in the Keck School of Medicine of USC, said he remains optimistic. “The move to green energy technology will make a difference,” he said. “Already, the market is responding to climate crises with carbon-free strategies for energy production and for saving energy. New fuel efficiency standards and public preferences have already begun to shift the vehicle industry—from SUVs to hybrid and electric vehicles. People will continue to make the right choice, if they have that option. "I have confidence that people will unite around a common goal of saving our planet,” he said. “They know that we may be able to procrastinate for a while, but inherently, we all want a better world for our children and grandchildren.”

Pat Levitt will direct the Developmental Neurogenetics Program at the Institute for the Developing Mind within The Saban Research Institute of Children’s Hospital Los Angeles. "With Dr. Levitt’s recruitment to the Institute for the Developing Mind, we begin a new chapter in our commitment to improving the lives of children with neurodevelopmental disorders,” said Brent Polk, director of The Saban Research Institute at CHLA.

Pat Levitt, USC Provost Professor of Neuroscience, Pharmacy, Psychiatry, Pediatrics and Psychology, has been named inaugural director of the Developmental Neurogenetics Program of the newly created Institute for the Developing Mind within The Saban Research Institute of Children’s Hospital Los Angeles. The Institute for the Developing Mind, envisioned to become an internationally recognized center for innovative research, diagnosis and treatment of neurodevelopmental and behavioral disorders, will provide comprehensive, interdisciplinary research and clinical services at CHLA and the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

"It is a privilege to take this role at a time when we have the opportunity to re-envision the way we approach and treat children with neurodevelopmental disorders, and when we can draw on the expertise of this great institution," said Levitt.

In his new role at the Institute, Levitt will establish a new program in developmental neurogenetics, initiating innovative basic and clinical research focused on understanding the role of genes and the environment in brain development. His work is concentrated on identifying how these factors combine to influence brain architecture, and how alterations in this process can cause brain disorders in children. "In this leadership role, Dr. Levitt will collaborate with colleagues in brain imaging and behavioral neuroscience to discover new strategies to identify children who are at risk for neurodevelopmental disorders and deliver individualized treatment and preventive care that creates immediate and lasting positive outcomes," said Michael Kuperman, division chief, Research on Children, Youth and Families, and vice chair of research in the Department of Pediatrics.

Levitt will continue to direct the Neuroscience Graduate Program at USC and will also spearhead an initiative to develop and lead an interdisciplinary autism center, bringing together experts from across the three campuses of Children’s Hospital Los Angeles and USC. "Pat’s dedication to students and education makes him an invaluable resource for our students,” said Carmen A. Puliafito, dean of the Keck School of Medicine. "Autism is one of the most compelling study areas in neuroscience, and in his new position Dr. Levitt will serve as an important guide to numerous young researchers searching for solutions to this complex disease.”

Throughout his career, Levitt’s research has focused on the role of genes and the environment on the developing brain, the molecular and developmental basis of neuropsychiatric and neurodevelopmental disorders, schizophrenia and autism spectrum disorders. His research has been continuously funded by the National Institutes of Health since 1983.

The Weekly NEWSMAKERS

A May 2 article in the Imperial Valley News highlighted clinical trials led by Agustin Garcia, associate professor of medical medicine at the Keck School of Medicine. Huyen Pham, assistant professor of clinical obstetrics and gynecology at the Keck School, and Vyonne Lin, assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the Keck School, studying breast, ovarian and cervical cancer immunotherapy. Health Canal also covered the trials.

A May 1 article in the Economist teached by Michael Habib, assistant professor of research in cell biology and neuroscience at the Keck School of Medicine, and a colleague studying how a flying pterosaur caught its dinner. They studied 36 birds and 50 bats, assessing bone densities and other measurements with that of the pterosaur’s fossils. The study found the prehistoric creature probably sat in wait for prey, then swooped after it.

On May 10, the Los Angeles Times reported the recruitment of professors Arthur Toga, Paul Thompson and more than 100 faculty, researchers and staff, including graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and others from the UCLA Laboratory of Neuro Imaging at the Keck School of Medicine. USC President C.L. Max Nikias said it was part of a hiring initiative that has brought two dozen esteemed academics to the university in the past three years. “They are people who are well established, they are the kings and queens of where they are,” Nikias said.

The story mentioned the Campaign for USC, which aims to raise $6 billion by 2018. Toga said the ability to expand at USC “seemed far greater than the opportunities” at UCLA. "USC has stepped up to the plate to do this,” Thompson said. The Los Angeles Times ran a second story and a live chat about the acquisition.

A May 3 article in Futurity highlighted research by Cheng-Ming Chuong, professor of pathology at the Keck School of Medicine, and colleagues, finding that stem cells appear to create the patterns in feathers. The researchers found that variations in the timing of cell development and positioning of the progenitor cells create the feathers’ distinct designs.

On May 9, CNN ran an op-ed by Ismael Nuno, assistant professor of clinical cardiology at the Keck School of Medicine, about his daughter’s eating disorder. As a result of the disorder, she developed cardiac arrhythmias, which eventually killed her. "As a parent of one of these young girls [I can warn other parents of some possible red flags. … If they see them, parents should seek help for their child,” Fuoco wrote.

A May 9 story in the San Marino Tribune covered a dinner tribute for Michael Keck, who served as chairman of the Department of Orthopedics at the Keck School of Medicine for 21 years.
Calendar of Events

Saturday, May 18
3 p.m. Keck School of Medicine – M.D./Ph.D., M.D. Commencement Ceremony. Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. Reemitting speaker Robert R. Ross, president and CEO of The California Endowment. A reception will immediately follow on the McCarthy Quad at the University Park campus. No tickets are required. More info: (323) 442-2833.

Monday, May 20
8 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. USC Minisymposium: “Musculoskeletal Development and Repair.” Various speakers. RCC 101. Info: (323) 442-8804.

Tuesday, May 21

Noon. “Supporting Each Other in Times of Crisis: Providing Psychological First Aid,” Jeff Harris, USC. XOR 1315. Info: (213) 621-0809.


Wednesday, May 22

9 a.m. – 12 p.m. USC Center for Excellence in Research Workshop: “Preclinical Imaging Workshop,” Peter Graessl, Grant Dalgrey, USC. CSC 250. Info: (213) 740-6709.


Friday, May 24

Notice: Deadline for calendar submission is a 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) 442-2812, or email to eblauf@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.

Psychiatry resident wins two key awards

By Josh Grossberg

Hearing out hundreds, if not thousands of psychiatry resident at the Keck School of Medicine of USC has recently been named the winner of two separate prestigious awards. Sean Sassano-Higgins was one of only 13 people in the country chosen for a GAP Fellowship, awarded by the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry. During the two-year program, Sassano-Higgins will attend four semi-annual meetings and work on a project with a GAP committee. The fellowship allows participants to meet and collaborate with some of the leading psychiatrists in North America and build relationships with other fellows.

Sassano-Higgins, a clinical professor at the Keck School and GAP’s president-elect, said Sassano-Higgins is the first GAP fellow from USC.

STROKE: USC study examines community-based interventions

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with multiple local community organizations, including Healthy African American Families, Watts Labor Community Action Committee, Esperanza Community Housing Corporation, the Worker Education & Resource Center, and the American Heart Association, among others. A central component of the entire center will be the creation of a Community Action Panel made up of individuals encompassing much of the racial and ethnic diversity of Los Angeles.

This panel will formally and regularly review and advise on the work in progress and products of the center to keep the research hands to effectively disseminate the work in the targeted communities and provide feedback to investigators at every stage of the research. An annual symposium also will be held to engage and foster the sharing of knowledge between community members and academic investigators in Los Angeles.

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BUITRAGO: USC surges in health care

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and will help navigate the changing landscape of the industry as health care reform and new payment models emerge.

“As a Los Angeles native, I’m thrilled to be working for an organization where I can leverage my unique knowledge and expertise of this health care market,” said Buitrago. “The Keck Medical Center is poised to be a nationally recognized leader in the industry, and I look forward to the opportunity I can play in helping us get there.”

Buitrago brings with her more than two decades of leadership experience across health care settings in the Los Angeles area, as well as rich knowledge of new care delivery models and managed care strategy in the current health care market. She most recently served as chief executive officer of the Pasadena-based Foothill Cardiology and Medical Group Inc. for more than 11 years. Prior to that, she spent six years in business development and managed care leadership positions at the Daniel Freeman Hospitals in Inglewood before taking on the position of chief executive officer of Culver City-based Integrated Physician Services. She holds a master’s degree in public health from UCLA.

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