Debbie Walsh, Don Larsen appointed CEO, CMO of USC Verdugo Hills Hospital

By Ryan Ball

As the Keck School of Medicine of USC’s first-year students waited eagerly in Mayer Auditorium on Aug. 16 for the start of the annual White Coat Ceremony, Sarah Wheeler was following instructions on how to fold her crisply pressed lab coat and drape it over her arm just right.

“For me, the white coat symbolizes putting others above yourself, and committing yourself to being a lifelong learner and teacher,” said 28-year-old Wheeler, who earned a master’s degree in epidemiology and pursued a career in research before deciding she really wanted to interact with patients.

Michael Opene, who has an interest in sports medicine and solving medical mysteries like the title character in the TV drama House, came to the ceremony with some perspective from those who came before.

“I hear some of the second- and third-year students say that when they’re feeling down and going through a rough patch, they’ll look at that white coat with their name on it and think, ‘Look at how much I’ve accomplished to get here. I can do this,’ and it kind of fires them up,” Opene remarked.

As the Trojan fight song played, it was time to walk onto the Harry and Celesta Pappas Quad to the cheers of supportive family and friends.

Keck School Dean Carmen A. Puliafito, MD, MBA, noted how exciting it will be for him to witness the ongoing metamorphosis of the 186 young people assembled before him.

“Today, they are suddenly grown up and ready to embark on a journey that will lead to their becoming smart, hard-working and, most importantly, compassionate physicians,” Puliafito added.

Vice Dean for Medical Education Henri Ford, MD, MBA, licensed the next four years in medical school to an Olympic event in which being a top finisher is far less important than running a good race.

Ford asked, “Will you ignore your partner who is stumbling, or will you try to support him or her?”

The keynote speaker was Jeffrey Canceko, MD, recipient of the school’s 2013 Humanism in Medicine Award. Canceko reflected on his time as a first-year medical student at Georgetown University as the events of Sept. 11, 2001, played out. While walking through a hospital on his way home, he was inspired by the sight of fourth-year medical students putting their own fears aside while donning their white coats and preparing for whatever may come.

“This is why you worked so hard to get here,” Canceko said.

Debbie Walsh, RN, MSN, has more than 30 years’ experience in hospital management and was most recently responsible for operations and strategic planning as president and CEO of USC Verdugo Hills Hospital as it adds new programs, expands facilities and initiates continuous improvement, develop and manage the hospital budget, and report monthly to the USC Verdugo Hills Hospital governing board.

Walsh has more than 30 years’ experience in hospital management and was most recently responsible for operations and strategic planning as president and CEO of USC Verdugo Hills Hospital.

Walsh has strong roots in the USC medical community, having previously served as CEO of the former USC University Hospital and USC Norris Cancer Hospital.

“Under her leadership, Debbie drove initiatives that improved outcomes, patient satisfaction and hospital finances; expanded and restructured hospital programs and information systems; and oversaw the construction of the Norris Inpatient Tower on the then-USC University Hospital campus,” said Tom Jackiewicz, MPH, senior vice president and CEO of USC Health.

“This familiarity and experience, along with her expertise in running community hospitals, makes her an ideal choice for taking USC Verdugo Hills Hospital forward.”

As the new CEO, Walsh will lead the hospital as it adds new programs, expands facilities and initiates new organization-wide policies and procedures. She will manage continuous improvement, develop and manage the hospital budget, and will report monthly to the USC Verdugo Hills Hospital governing board.

As the physician executive for USC Verdugo, Larsen will help drive key clinical and strategic initiatives at the hospital, and will serve as an important liaison between Keck Medicine of USC leaders and USC Verdugo physician partners.

As CMO, he will promote relationships with new and existing physician partners, and will support business development through targeted community outreach. He will also guide the development and implementation of new systems to ensure optimum quality and efficiency.

Walsh holds a bachelor’s degree in nursing from California State University, Los Angeles, and a master’s degree in nursing from Azusa Pacific University. She maintains a California registered nurse license. She has also served as a board member and area board chair for the Hospital Association of Southern California.

Larsen is an associate professor of neurosurgery and radiology at the Keck School of Medicine of USC. He holds a medical degree from Chicago Medical School and a master’s of business administration from the USC Marshall School of Business. He previously served as medical director for USC Care Medical Group, and CMO for Keck Hospital of USC and USC Norris Cancer Hospital.

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By Hope Hamashige

Zuleima Hidalgo, a student in the USC Divi-
sion of Biokinesiology and Physical Therapy, was in attendance at the White House on Aug. 9 when President Barack Obama signed into law a student loan reform bill.

Hidalgo, who is about to enter her second year in the Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) program, was one of several students asked to attend the signing. Prior to putting his signature on the legislation, Obama thanked the students who had raised their voices in support of the legislation.

“Without their voice, without their participation, we probably would not have gotten this bill done,” Obama said.

Hidalgo said it was an incredible honor to stand behind Obama as a witness to history. “To witness our president sign something that I was so passionate about made me feel so proud, as well as happy, to know that our Congress could come to an agreement,” she said.

Hidalgo also got the chance to meet the president and tell him how grateful she is for the passage of this bill.

The Bipartisan Student Loan Certainty Act of 2013 retroactively lowered the interest rate on student loans disbursed after July 1, regardless of the type, have been reduced to 5.4 percent. Interest rates on graduate student loans, depending on the type, have been reduced from 6.8 to 3.9 percent and for graduate students the interest rate for loans to undergraduates, whether they are subsidized or not. The bill lowers the interest rate on student loan debt, which has ballooned in recent years, burdens new graduates, their families and “has a depressive effect on the economy overall.” He added that student loan debt makes it harder for recent graduates to buy homes or start their own businesses.

Hidalgo said she expects this measure to be a major benefit to her, as well as her classmates, once she completes her degree. “Honestly,” she said, “this alleviates some of the pressure that my classmates and I will face to pay off our loans as quickly as possible so that we don’t accumulate too much interest.” Not only does she see the new legislation as a boon for students, she also sees it as a help to the continuing recession. “If college is affordable, then that means less debt that America will be in,” she added. “That means students will be more prone after graduation to buy a house, to buy appliances and furniture, to buy a car — those are all things that help keep the economy going.”

Future student loan rate increases will be tied to financial markets, but they will not exceed 8.25 percent for undergraduates and 9.5 percent for graduate students. Because of the new legislation, estimates are that nearly 11 million students across the United States will see their interest rates drop.

Jason Murillo, a USC financial aid officer, noted that “the new lower rates will result in thousands of dollars in savings over the life of these loans.”

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WHITE COAT: New students will prepare to learn more than ever thought possible, says speaker

Continued from Page 1

Canceko told the assembled crowd, “This is why you’re going to work harder than you’ve ever worked before, and you will learn more than you ever thought was possible. We hope for the best and prepare for the worst.”

The Keck School of Medicine’s ceremony was the first of several White Coat Ceremonies taking place on the Health Sciences and University Park Campuses. The USC School of Pharmacy held its White Coat Ceremony on Thursday, Aug. 22, on the Harry and Celesta Pappas Quad. Below is a list of the remaining white coat ceremonies:

• Otorrinolaringology and Head and Neck Surgery at the School of Medicine, Sept. 9, from 5 to 7 p.m.
• Biokinesiology and Physical Therapy at the School of Dentistry, Thursday, Aug. 29, at 6 p.m.

The ceremony, at 4 p.m. in Founders Park.

Division of Biokinesiology and Physical Therapy at the School of Dentistry.

Division of Occupational Therapy at the School of Dentistry of USC. Friday, Aug. 30, at 5 p.m. on the lawn behind the Eli and Edythe Broad CIRM Center for Regenerative Medicine and Stem Cell Research on the Health Sciences Campus.
New electrophysiology director brings love of tech to Keck Medical Center

By Josh Grossberg

Pacemakers and defibrillators are fairly common life-saving devices these days, but when Rahul N. Doshi, MD, was getting his start in the medical profession, they both relied on fairly rudimentary technology. A self-described tech geek, Doshi knew the field that was advancing so quickly because it was a part of his life. Doshi was on the cusp of great change, and he wanted to be part of it.

As the new director of electrophysiology at the Keck Medical Center of USC, Doshi will help guide the future of this exciting field that is advancing in ways he couldn’t have imagined. “It’s a relatively new and fast-growing sub-specialty of cardiovascular medicine,” he said. “It’s very different from what the internists and cardiologists do. They look at arteries and pipes. I look at the heart’s internal wiring.”

Electrocyt is where pacemakers and defibrillators become smaller, more complex and ubiquitous, Doshi said that doctors can now target specific areas of the heart that cause it to beat irregularly. “We’re using technology to essentially bum or freeze parts of the heart that are responsible for these abnormal rhythms,” he said. “This technology has grown tremendously over the last decade. Catheter ablation is one of the fastest growing procedures in cardiovascular medicine.”

As with all electronics, the devices that Doshi uses to keep the heart pumping continue to evolve. For example, he keeps a small device in his briefcase that can turn his iPhone into an EKG monitor.

Doshi received his medical degree from Stanford University School of Medicine. He arrived at the Keck Medical Center after serving as director of electrophysiology at UC Irvine and St. Jude Medical Center. A fellow of both the American College of Cardiology and the Heart Rhythm Society, Doshi has experience in all areas of electrophysiology, including complex ablation and implantable device therapy. He is active on numerous committees and advisory boards, and has published dozens of peer-reviewed articles.

In his new job, Doshi oversees four electrophysiologists, a lab team and other support staff. “We’re rapidly expanding,” he said. “It’s amazing how far things are going. The potential demand for this is huge, especially here at USC.”
Calendar of Events

Tuesday, Aug. 27

Noon, KISOM Continuing Medical Education Workshop. "Faculty Development: Curriculum Development." Julie Nyquist and Cha-Chi Fung, USC. KAM 206. Info: (323) 442-2372


Wednesday, Aug. 28


8:30 a.m. Medicines Grand Rounds. "Introduction to Clinical Research," Alex Baleskien, USC. BRD 732-734. Info: (323) 226-7923

Noon, KISOM Continuing Medical Education Workshop. "Faculty Development: Writing Smart Objectives." Julie Nyquist and Cha-Chi Fung, USC. KAM 206. Info: (323) 442-2372

Thursday, Aug. 29

Noon, KISOM Continuing Medical Education Workshop. "Faculty Development: Lectures Medical Students Will Want to Attend." Mike Snow and Dixie Fisher, USC. KAM 206. Info: (323) 442-2372

5 p.m. School of Biomathematics and Physical Therapy White Coat Ceremony: Broad Center Lawn. Info: (323) 442-2989

Friday, Aug. 30


5 p.m. School of Occupational Therapy White Coat Ceremony: Broad Center Lawn-area. Info: (323) 442-3340

Friday, Sept. 6

11:30 a.m.–1 p.m. Southern California Environmental Health Sciences Center. "Functional Annotation of Breast Cancer Risk Regions," Gerry Goezra, USC. SBII 116. Info: (323) 442-7732

Thursday, Sept. 12


Thursday, Sept. 26


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, 4400 S. Figueroa St., or fax to (323) 442-1369, or email to elabaukim@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.

Patient Experience helps couple celebrate their 54th wedding anniversary

By Josh Grossberg

About to celebrate their 54th wedding anniversary, Grace and Ray Vagas were not going to let anything — as brotherhood as a hospital, stay stop them. And neither was the staff of USC Norris Cancer Hospital, where Ray has been a patient for nearly a month after being diagnosed with leukemia.

When their son, Ray Vagas Jr., realized the anniversary was approaching, he knew he had to do something. He contacted the staff of the Patient Experience Program at the Keck Medical Center of USC.

“I called them to see what we could bring in,” he recalled. “They said, ‘We’ve got it. We’ll do it. We’ll staff come and bring them balloons.’

On June 20, Grace and Ray Vagas were surprised with a beautiful cake and some happy wishes from family and staff.

“They’re so loving and tight-knit,” said receptionist Laura Molyneaux, who organized the event for the Patient Experience Program at the Keck Medical Center of USC.

Anniversaries have always been a big deal for the couple. To mark the 25-year milestone, they gathered their original wedding party and recreated the ceremony — Grace even wore a wedding dress. And for their 55th anniversary, they went on a second honeymoon to Costa Rica.

“It was such a pleasure to have your group surprise you with a cake,” Grace said. “It was just lovely. It made a day that could have been sad very festive.”

In case of an emergency...

Call the Emergency Information Phone: (213) 740-9333 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.

John Niparko tapped as president of USC Care Medical Group

John K. Niparko, MD, has been appointed to the position of president of USC Care Medical Group. Niparko will serve a two-year term, which began on July 1. He succeeds Edward Gandall, MD, chair of the Department of Medicine, who also served a two-year term.

Also the recently appointed chair of the Department of Otolaryngology-Head & Neck Surgery at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, Niparko joined USC from Johns Hopkins University, where he was the inaugural George T. Nager Professor and director of the Division of Otolaryngology, Neurotology and Skull Base Surgery.

Niparko received his bachelor’s degree and medical degree with distinction from the University of Michigan, abstracts, 45 review articles and four books, among them Atlas of Skull Base Surgery and Cochlear Implants: Principles and Practices. He has served as editor-in-chief of the Journal of Otolaryngology since 2006.

“The role of the USC Care president is critical to achieving a high-caliber, thriving physician practice within the Keck Medical Center of USC,” said Tom Jackiewicz, MPH, senior vice president and CEO for USC Health. “In this role, Dr. Niparko will collaborate with leadership across the health-care enterprise as well as connect the achievements of our practice into the greater University of Southern California for academic and research communities.”

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Patient Ray Vagas and his wife Grace were able to celebrate their 54th wedding anniversary in style at USC Norris Cancer Hospital.

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