Surgeons pioneer robotic prostate cancer treatment

By Mary Daicuma

Three patients entered a new era of prostate cancer treatment recently, as Keck Medicine of USC became the first academic medical center in the nation to use new energy-based robotic ablative technology in an outpatient procedure for a prostate cancer patient.

USC Institute of Urology surgeons used a Food and Drug Administration-cleared non-invasive high-intensity focused ultrasound (HIFU) surgical ablation system to destroy prostate tumors in three patients. The system enables surgeons to introduce the HIFU system into the patient’s body through the rectum to treat localized tumors in the prostate gland.

Inderbir S. Gill, MD, founding executive director, USC Institute of Urology and chairman and professor, Catherine and Joseph Aresty Department of Urology at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, performed the surgery on two patients on Dec. 10 and one more on Dec. 11. Two patients were discharged the same day and the third patient went home the next morning, which is sooner than patients typically experience with prostate cancer surgery.

“The goal of focal HIFU is to target and destroy only the significant cancer lesion, thereby preserving the delicate nerves around the prostate,” Dr. Gill said.

It’s beginning to sound a lot like Christmas for patients

LA Opera, Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute partner to sing carols, patriotic songs at hospitals, care facilities during holidays

By Zen Vuong

U niversity of Southern California (USC)’s Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute (ZNI) is examining whether Christmas carols could help people with Alzheimer’s disease or dementia recover memories.

Music to Remember, a program ZNI and LA Opera started in 2012, sends trained vocalists to sing holiday songs at long-term care and assisted living facilities in the Los Angeles area. Other partners include the Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center at the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

“Music is the universal language that enables us to express how we feel,” said Berislav Zlokovic, MD, PhD, director of ZNI, based at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, and holder of the Mary Hayley and Selim Zilkha Chair in Alzheimer’s Disease Research. “There have been some studies about the effect of music on Alzheimer’s, but I don’t think there is a definitive study.”

This year, a group of LA Opera vocalists will sing at 13 hospitals, long-term care or assisted living facilities over five days. Holiday music is ubiquitous in December in the United States. Thus, the aim of Music to Remember is to tap into memories associated with these festive tunes.

The Alzheimer’s Association,

L A Opera, Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute partner to sing carols, patriotic songs at hospitals, care facilities during holidays

LA Opera, Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute partner to sing carols, patriotic songs at hospitals, care facilities during holidays

It’s beginning to sound a lot like Christmas for patients

By Zen Vuong

U niversity of Southern California (USC)’s Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute (ZNI) is examining whether Christmas carols could help people with Alzheimer’s disease or dementia recover memories.

Music to Remember, a program ZNI and LA Opera started in 2012, sends trained vocalists to sing holiday songs at long-term care and assisted living facilities in the Los Angeles area. Other partners include the Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center at the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

“Music is the universal language that enables us to express how we feel,” said Berislav Zlokovic, MD, PhD, director of ZNI, based at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, and holder of the Mary Hayley and Selim Zilkha Chair in Alzheimer’s Disease Research. “There have been some studies about the effect of music on Alzheimer’s, but I don’t think there is a definitive study.”

This year, a group of LA Opera vocalists will sing at 13 hospitals, long-term care or assisted living facilities over five days. Holiday music is ubiquitous in December in the United States. Thus, the aim of Music to Remember is to tap into memories associated with these festive tunes.

The Alzheimer’s Association,

Alice Issai named COO of Keck Medical Center of USC

By Douglas Morino

K eck Hospital of USC and the USC Norris Cancer Hospital will have a new leader as Alice Issai, MBA, has been named the new chief operating officer of Keck Medical Center of USC beginning Dec. 21. Issai will report to Rod Hanners, CEO of Keck Medical Center and COO of Keck Medicine of USC.

Issai has extensive experience managing and leading large, quaternary/tertiary health care organizations. She comes from UC Irvine Health, leading large, quaternary/tertiary health care organizations. She comes from UC Irvine Health, where she was president and COO of USC’s flagship tertiary hospital in Southern California; as COO she oversaw operations for a 426-bed academic medical center, a freestanding research hospital Los Angeles Medical Center and COO of Keck Medicine of USC.

Issai also spent 12 years at Kaiser Permanente’s Los Angeles Medical Center and COO of Keck Medicine of USC.

Issai has extensive experience managing and leading large, quaternary/tertiary health care organizations. She comes from UC Irvine Health, where she was president and COO of USC’s flagship tertiary hospital in Southern California; as COO she oversaw operations for a 426-bed academic medical center, a freestanding research hospital Los Angeles Medical Center and COO of Keck Medicine of USC.

Issai also spent 12 years at Kaiser Permanente’s Los Angeles Medical Center, where she was COO of Kaiser’s 500-bed flagship tertiary hospital in Southern California; and rose to vice president of finance at City of Hope National Medical Center.

It was fortunate to have Alice as a colleague at Kaiser Permanente,” Hanners said. “As a leader, she emphasizes empowering staff and creating partnerships with physicians to drive performance, quality improvement and patient experience. I know she will be a great addition to the Trojan Family.”

Emergency medicine physician offers tips for holiday safety

By Douglas Morino

T he holidays are an opportunity to give thanks and celebrate life. They also can be a time of danger.

Overindulgence of alcohol or drugs is an increased health threat during the holidays, experts at Keck Medicine of USC say, as is accidental consumption of harmful substances. Children may be most vulnerable. During the holiday season, emergency rooms see many young patients who have accidentally ingested medications from visiting older relatives or family friends.

Michael Levine, MD, an assistant professor of emergency medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of USC who specializes in toxicology and treats patients suffering from drug and alcohol overdoses, including children who unknowingly consume dangerous chemicals.

“Around Thanksgiving, we start seeing an increase in accidental ingestions,” said Levine, who works at Los Angeles County+USC Medical Center as well as USC Verdugo Hills Hospital and Keck Hospital of USC.

Prior to joining Keck Medicine, Levine completed his toxicology fellowship at the Banner Good Samaritan Medical Center in Phoenix and residency at the Brigham and Women’s/Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. With the recent hiring of two new toxicology physicians, the LAC+USC Department of Emergency Medicine’s Section of

Inderbir Gill, MD, presents to a screen during a noninvasive high intensity focused ultrasound procedure on Dec. 10.

Baritone Eli Villanueva sings holiday songs at the VA Long Beach Healthcare System.

Keith Hobbs of CHLA to be CEO at USC Verdugo Hills Hospital

By Meg Aldrich

Los Angeles area hospital management expert Keith M. Hobbs, MBA, has been named CEO of USC Verdugo Hills Hospital, effective Jan. 4. Hobbs has been at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles (CHLA), holding multiple leadership positions over more than 20 years.

“Keith Hobbs’ skills and experience make him the ideal choice for the position of CEO of USC Verdugo Hills Hospital,” said Thomas E. Jackiewicz, senior vice president and CEO of Keck Medicine of USC. “His long tenure at Children’s Hospital demonstrates a proven track record for strengthening and supporting all aspects of hospital operations — clinical, operational and financial.”

Hobbs most recently served as vice president of ancillary services, support services and supply chain. In that role, he was responsible for the operational and financial oversight of the departments of radiology, pathology and anesthesiology critical care medicine, along with other departments and contracted services at CHLA.

He also had been associate vice president of finance and administrative director of the department of surgery and manager of decision support.

Before entering health care, Hobbs was a compensation representative for Walt Disney Imagineering in Glendale and a senior compensation analyst for Security Pacific Corp. in Los Angeles.

Inderbir Gill, MD, presents to a screen during a noninvasive high intensity focused ultrasound procedure on Dec. 10.

Baritone Eli Villanueva sings holiday songs at the VA Long Beach Healthcare System.
Puliafito welcomes Alumni Board of Governors to HSC
By Amanda Busick

This is your last chance! The Alumni Board of Governors will meet on Wednesday, Jan. 6, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. in the Board of Governors to host a quarterly meeting, discussed many aspects of governance, and highlighted that policies should be proactive and get involved in their own care. The panel consisted of Seth C. Garret, MD, medical director of orthopedic surgery residency program; Stephen B. Gruber, MD, PhD, MPhil, director of the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center, and Ryan V. Matthews, MD, division chief of cardiovascular medicine. Andrew A. Moshfeghi, MD, MBA, associate professor of clinical ophthalmology at the USC Eye Institute; Daniel Oakes, MD, director of the USC Joint Replacement Program; and Shannon Orange, MD, MPH, assistant professor of clinical medicine.

The Board of Governors is a volunteer organization that is an integral part of the development and implementation of programs and services of the USC Alumni Association. Members represent each of the alumni association constituency groups as well as all of the major academic areas of the university.

Calendar of Events

Tuesday, Dec. 22
7:30 a.m. - 9:30 a.m., Ophthalmology Grand Rounds. Anahit Sastri, MD, USC, HIG Conference Room. 3rd Floor. Info: Tsvianna Christopher, (323) 409-5233, tsvianna.christopher@med.usc.edu, http://usceye.org

Wednesday, Jan. 6
9 a.m.-noon, Salen Research Institute at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles Seminar “Beyond the Three Dimensional Decuphasing Hox-Mediated Averroes to Educational Muscular Immunity.” Necati Y. Surana, MD, PhD, Harvard Medical School. Auditorium, Saban Research Building. 4661 Sunset Blvd. Parking is available at the main hospital garage. Info: Rini Gill, (323) 361-8715, tcepa@hla.org, http://hla.edu/cepa

Saturday, Jan. 16
7 a.m.-3:30 p.m., Continuing Medical Education second annual Update on Esophageal Diseases Conference. USC course directors: Edy Soffer, MD, and John Lymph, MD. University Club of course directors: Edy Soffer, MD, and Esophageal Diseases Conference. Main Hospital Garage. Info: Ritu Gill, (323) 409-5233, ritiag@med.usc.edu, http://usceye.org

July 28, 2016: 11:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m., Stress Call Seminar. Didier Stammers, Max Plank Institute for Heart and Long Research, Eli and Edythe Broad IBRIM Center Auditorium, BCG 101. Info: Crazy Leafly, (323) 442-2172, lytl@med.usc.edu, http://inmellcmed.usc.edu

Saturday, Jan. 10
7 a.m.-12 p.m., Continuing Medical Education third annual USC Multidisciplinary Breast Cancer Symposium. USC programs: Saly L. Elting, MD, Eugene Chung, MD, PhD, JD, Christi A. Rossell, MD, Naomi S. Schechter, MD, Stephen F. Sener, MD. International Contentional Hotel, Los Angeles. Info: Anika Bobb, (323) 442-2547, anika.bobb@med.usc.edu, http://usc.edu/cme

Thursday-Saturday, Feb. 4-6
7 a.m.-12 p.m. Continuing Medical Education Conference: Practical Urology. USC course directors: Indebrun S. Gill, MD, Rene Notis, MD, and Monish Aon, MD. Areyes Auditorium. Info: Anika Bobb, (323) 442-2547, anika.bobb@med.usc.edu, http://usc.edu/cme

Saturday, Jan. 30

Tuesday-Wednesday, Feb. 16-17
10 a.m.-3:55 p.m., Continuing Medical Education Conference: Multidimensional View of Diabetes and Obesity. Areyes Auditorium. Info: Anika Bobb, (323) 442-2547, anika.bobb@med.usc.edu, http://usc.edu/cme

Friday-Saturday, Feb. 19-20
Noon-5:45 p.m., Continuing Medical Education Innovations in Medical Education Conference. Helen Los Angeles/ San Gabriel. Info: Anika Bobb, (323) 442-2547, anika.bobb@med.usc.edu, http://usc.edu/cme

Notice: Calendar items are due at least 10 days before publication date. Timely submission does not guarantee publication in print. See more calendar entries at http://www.usc.edu/calendar-of-events. Submit items to anika@usc.edu. Include day, date, time, title of talk, first and last name of speaker, affiliation of speaker, location and a phone number/email address.

Transplant patient's young son is a triumph of faith and medical expertise
By Margaret Trytan

The successful pancreas-kidney transplant that Estella Marquez Vazquez had a few years ago at Keck Medicine of USC meant that she no longer needed frequent monitoring and administer insulin as a type 1 diabetic. But there was another wish she hoped could still come true — she wanted to be a mother.

“They told me there are risks and possible complications, but I always wanted to get pregnant. I had faith,” said Marquez, 32, a Las Vegas resident who underwent the transplant surgery in 2011 and celebrated the first birthday of her son, Jesus.

To ensure the best chance of a successful pregnancy without leading to rejection of the transplanted organs, the kidney-pancreas post-transplant team at Keck Medical Center of USC had to plan carefully in advance, adjusting Marquez’ medications and scheduling frequent checkups despite the distance from Marquez’ home.

“Unlike a kidney transplant that has been done alone, diagnosing a rejection on a pancreas transplant is a bit harder,” said Yaat A. Quadri, MD, medical director of the kidney-pancreas transplant program and associate professor of clinical medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

Not only is it difficult for recipients of this type of transplant, known as SPKT, to conceive and deliver a healthy baby, they face additional risks. Complications can include failure or rejection of the transplanted organ(s), deterioration in maternal renal and pancreatic function, and increased risks of maternal illness or disease, maternal death, miscarriage, preterm birth, fetal malformations, low birth weight, hypertension, pre eclampsia and infection.

Quazi explained that SPKT surgeries are rare, usually only offered to candidates with kidney failure from type 1 diabetes. So far, 798 were done nationwide in 2014, making up 2.4 percent of all transplants in the United States for that year. Since 2002, a total of 43 kidney-pancreas transplants have been performed at Keck Medicine of USC. “Eighty percent of the few centers in the world that also considers kidney-pancreas transplants for certain type 2 diabetics with insulin dependency. There’s an even lower rate of successful pregnancies for these patients — research from Oregon Health University indicated only 77 pregnancies worldwide for 43 SPKT patients as of 2011.”

To facilitate pregnancy, the team changed one of Marquez’ immunosuppressants and adjusted doses to increase negative effects on the growth and development, while still maintaining good function of her transplanted organs. In addition to follow-ups by a local high-risk OB-GYN in Las Vegas, Marquez and her husband have monthly trips to Los Angeles throughout her pregnancy and after delivery for monitoring by the USC team, which conducted lab tests and ultrasound procedures.

“They had to come all the way from Vegas, so they’ve always been harder because it wasn’t easy to have them get in a car while pregnant and have them come all the way over here. I was always worried about the safety of the entire family driving back and forth,” Quazi said.

Fast-forward to early October 2015, when Marquez, accompanied by her husband and little Jesus, made another visit to Los Angeles for a checkup. Numerous staff members greeted the family, expressing their disbelife at how much the boy had grown since their last visit in March 2015.

Jesus and his mother are both thriving and in good health. After an all-clear from Quazi, the Marquez family won’t need to make the drive again to Los Angeles until next year.

- - -

CAROLS: Music to Remember also to sing to veterans, sick children
Continued from page 1

California Southwest chapter, also is part of the collaborative effort.

“Music in general has a transformative effect on people with dementia because it corresponds with certain parts of their life,” said Ayeshka Dixon, who manages the Alzheimer’s Association’s Memory Lunes in Los Angeles.

“Music makes them feel connected to a time period or a memory associated with that song. People with dementia physically react to the music.”

LA Opera also will share holiday joy by singing to veterans and sick children. Dressed in layers and capped with Santa hats, LA Opera singers stroll through the halls of facilities such as Keir Nursing Home, Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center, City of Hope and Huntington Hospital.

“In the course of even 45 minutes of music, you see a calm going over someone who is very disconnected or who may be very agitated,” said Stacy Brightman, a spokeswoman for LA Opera. “Someone who was only looking down will start to look up with a focus. We’ve even seen foot tapping and tears.”

Although Music to Remember started there, LA Opy has been singing to children in hospitals and to the elderly for the past six years, Brightman said. “The seasonal concerts are part of a movement toward total patient care, she said. “You can’t separate effects to the spirit and soul from their mind,” Brightman said.

“Holiday music is some of your earliest memories, and that’s the key to Alzheimer’s. You remember the voice you learned when you were very young.”

http://usc.edu/cme
Surgeons join forces to remove spinal tumor

By Melissa Masatani

To do what's best for a patient, sometimes a combined effort is the best approach. That was the case recently at Keck Medical Center of USC, where an experienced neurosurgeon and an expert in robotic urologic surgery teamed up successfully to remove a particularly troublesome spinal tumor.

Patrick C. Hsieh, MD, associ- ate professor in the Department of Neurological Surgery and director of minimally invasive spine surgery at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, entrusted the case to Andrew J. Hung, MD, professor of clinical urology, to assist him during a paraspinal tumor resection on Nov. 3. The patient, a 71-year-old woman with neuromatosis, had developed a rapidly growing tumor outside the spinal canal, next to the aorta and kidneys in the L3-L4 spinal section.

“For this particular tumor in this location, we felt that this was a favorable tumor to treat robotically,” Hsieh said. “The advantage of the robotic procedure is that there is a much smaller incision with very little disruption of the soft tissue and minimal blood loss.”

The da Vinci Surgical System robot has brought revolutionary changes to certain major surgeries, particularly in urology. Other fields, including neurosurgery, may not yet have as much experience using the device, however, so a multidisciplinary approach is needed to provide the most meaningful benefit to a patient.

“Teamwork is critical between specialties and surgeons — each brings clinical skills and experience in multidisciplinary procedures like this,” said Hung, who is director of robotic simulation and education at the USC Institute of Urology. “In this procedure, we incurred almost no blood loss, and the surgery was completed in a little over an hour. The neurosurgery team told us that a similar procedure done traditionally [non-robotically] could have taken several hours longer and resulted in significantly more blood loss.”

The surgeons approached the deep-seated spinal tumor through multiple small ports, and because of the robot’s ability to work in confined spaces, quickly were able to dissect the tumor from the nerves and organs before removing the mass. In this case, the patient has underlying health problems that delayed her release from the hospital, but Hsieh said healthier patients could be discharged as soon as the next day after a robotic procedure.

“We were able to find innovative ways to deal with complex diseases and a multidisciplinary approach allows us to do things that, if we would not be able to do separately,” Hsieh said.

SAFETY: Hospitals seeing increase in prescriptions for powerful medication

Continued from page 1

Medical Toxicology has expanded to other health care facilities, including Huntington Hospital in Pasadena.

Prior to the holidays, medical professionals at these sites have already seen an increase in prescription drug overdoses. Levine attributes the trend to an increased number of prescriptions for powerful pain medications.

“We’ve seen an increase in prescrip- tion-rate drug overdoses and this is consistent with the national trend,” he said. “There has been a push over the last couple of years to be aggressively treating pain, and the volume of prescriptions for opiates has increased. If people are in pain, they want medicine to treat it.”

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has called the rise of prescription painkiller overdoses an epidemic. The amount of painkillers prescribed and sold in the United States has nearly quadrupled since 1999, according to the agency.

Meanwhile, overdoses from illegal drugs have been rising. Heroin overdoses quadrupled this decade, according to CDC data. Doctors like Levine who work in local emergency rooms say the number of accidental overdoses could be drastically reduced by increased awareness. During the holidays, it’s important to make sure all medication is safely stored out of the reach of children.

“Visiting grandparents who are not used to having young children around should not be leaving medication on the nightstand,” Levine said.

Those struggling with addiction also may feel especially vulnerable during the holidays, increasing the risk of alcohol and drug abuse.

“Around the holidays, we see an increase in injection overdoses and suicide rates,” Levine said.

The emergency physicians and nurses at Keck Medical Center of USC facilities are well equipped to handle the influx of patients who have overdosed.

“As a general rule, if someone makes it to the hospital alive, their odds of survival are very high,” Levine said.

“The key is very good, supportive care.”

Emotion recognition in people with autism spectrum disorder is focus of study

By Debra Kain

Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often have difficulty recognizing and interpreting how facial expressions convey various emotions — for instance, anger, sadness or disgust. This can make it difficult for an individual with ASD to navigate social situations and empathize with others.

A study led by researchers at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles and Columbia University used functional magnetic resonance imaging to study the neural activity of different brain regions in participants with ASD, compared with typically developing (TD) participants, when viewing facial emotions.

The researchers found that while behavioral response to face-stimuli was comparable across groups, corresponding neural activity between ASD and TD groups differed dramatically. “Staring at these similarities and differences may help us understand the origins of interpersonal experience in people with ASD, and provide targets for intervention,” said principal investigator Bradley S. Peterson, MD, director of the Institute for the Developing Mind at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles. “The results have been published online in advance of publication by the journal Human Brain Mapping.”

In order to more objectively look at how participants in both groups responded to a broad range of emotional faces, the study used fMRI to measure two neurophysiological systems, called valence and arousal, that underlie all emotional experi- ences. “Valence” refers to the degree to which an emotion is pleasant or unpleasant. “Arousal” represents the degree to which an emotion is associated with high or low interest.

“We believe this is the first study to examine the difference in neural activity in brain regions that process valence or arousal between individuals with ASD and those with TD,” said Peterson, who is director of the division of child and adoles- cent psychiatry at the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

“During the holidays, it’s important to view the area surrounding the face, as there was much more neural activity in participants with ASD when they viewed any facial emotions, like happiness or fear.”

The scientists concluded that the differences in neural responses to visual stimuli may provide clues about how individuals with ASD might perceive and interpret facial expressions.

Inderbir Gill, second from right, examines a patient during a noninvasive, high intensity focused ultrasound procedure on Dec. 10.

TREATMENT: New technique is noninvasive, nonsurgical

Continued from page 1

thus providing both continence and potency,” Gill said. “This is a noninvasive, nonsurgical, outpatient procedure that does not involve any radiation. There is no blood loss, the recovery is quick and typically the patient is back on his feet and discharged home the same day.”

Prostate cancer is the second leading cause of death among American men, behind lung cancer. It is diagnosed most frequently in older men.

According to Gill, HIFU surgery is an option for patients who have low-to-intermediate risk cancer, with localized lesions within a prostate that is no more than 40 grams in volume, and who already possess strong levels of continence and potency.

In general, patients should have organ-confined disease, and a prostate-specific antigen (PSA) level under 15-20 ng/ml.

Brett Lindsay, 46, of Scotts- dale, AZ, was the first of Gill’s patients to receive this form of treatment. As a regional vice president for Clean Energy Fuels and a strong advocate for the environment, Lindsay maintains golf on the weekends.

“I was anxious to find a form of treatment that would remove my cancer, but still allow me to get back on the road with minimal down time,” Lindsay said. “With HIFU I can continue working with my team and still having the energy to get to a few rounds of golf on the weekends.”

Currently, HIFU systems developed by two manufactur- ers, EDAP TMS and SonaCare Medical, have been granted FDA clearance. The USC Institute of Urology is the first and only center in the U.S. to offer both these cutting-edge technologies, which collectively cover the entire range of HIFU treatments.

Patients are given general anesthetic and the HIFU probe is inserted via the rectum. The ultrasound beam is aimed at the prostate through the rectum, destroying the tumor noninva- sively and precisely, with a flash of heat.
Employee of the Year chosen for her work ethic, being a team player

By Douglas Morino

Christine Hovagimian was hoping her colleague would win. But as the annual Employee of the Year Award was announced Dec. 9 at the 2015 Holiday Party, Hovagimian heard her own name called.

“It was very surprising,” Hovagimian said of winning the Keck Medicine of USC Employee of the Year Award. “I was not even thinking about another candidate. I was hoping, she said, “It would be her.”

Hovagimian, an accountant representative at the Office of Revenue Cycle Management for the USC Care Medical Group Inc., was selected by the Keck Medicine leadership team from the 12 winners of “Employee of the Month” in 2015.

Hovagimian was chosen for her strong work ethic, harmonious and cooperative spirit, being a team player and for being a role model of our USC Keck Culture Values. She received a $2,500 check as part of the award.

Hovagimian has been with Keck Medicine for three years and said that she tries to promote an atmosphere of collaboration, respect and unity in the workplace.

“I was raised in that atmosphere — be respectful to your elders, be courteous and be kind,” Hovagimian said. “I don’t put differences between people and I am more into unity than the individual. I try and create unity everywhere I go.”

She works in a “very hectic” environment — tending to a steady stream of phone calls and emails to ensure that billing is done correctly and on time. She is credited with an effort to decrease missing charges by 42 percent in the past 12 months.

“We make sure providers get rendered for services,” she said. “We make sure our patients are always happy and so are our physicians.”

Those who nominated Hovagimian said her willingness to share knowledge and technical expertise makes her a driving force within her department. Recognized as the November Employee of the Month, Hovagimian also displayed superior initiative and outstanding leadership.

Hovagimian said using effective communication was part of her success in the workplace. She also knows everyone’s name.

“I’ll remember the name of everyone I meet so I can put a face with a name,” she said. “Name recognition is a big tool.”

And about a year and a half ago, Hovagimian created a “Month End Potluck” — a small, informal gathering to bring people in her division together in the midst of a busy and often stressful time — the final billing day of the month. What started as a box of doughnuts and bagels at a cube for a few colleagues to share has turned into a monthly tradition that brings members in the nine departments across CBO together.

“We are so spread apart in our different departments, we would never associate; she said.

“This is a chance to bring everyone together.”