ATRI hosts inaugural meeting

By Douglas Morino

Top researchers from across the U.S. gathered in San Diego recently to address a renewed commitment to understand and fight the leading fatal neurodegenerative disease affecting the aging population.

The USC Alzheimer’s Therapeutic Research Institute (ATRI) Partnership Meeting was held in January and brought together USC leaders, neuroscientists and visiting researchers to discuss the new institute and the future of Alzheimer’s research. The two-day event marks the first meeting since the founding of ATRI this past summer.

ATRI was established in June and is led by Paul Aisen, a professor of neurology at the Keck School of Medicine of USC and one of the country’s leading Alzheimer’s scientists. With 65 researchers and staff members, ATRI is focused on the development of new, effective treatments for Alzheimer’s disease through clinical trials. USC ATRI adds a strong clinical research program to complement the university’s existing strengths in Alzheimer’s disease research.

“I am grateful to be working at an institute under the great leadership of USC,” Aisen said. “We have had fantastic support from not just university leaders, but also from staff and faculty and so many other people at USC.”

At the meeting, Aisen was joined by Carmen A. Puliafito, MD, MBA, dean of the Keck School of Medicine of USC, and USC Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs Michael Quick.

Visiting researchers toured ATRI’s new facility in north San Diego, which offers sprawling views of Sorrento Valley and spacious work areas for researchers and staff. Guests later were hosted by Aisen, Puliafito and Quick at a reception and dinner at the Westgate Hotel in downtown San Diego.

The following day, ATRI staff and visiting researchers took part in presentations focused on research, clinical operations, recruitment and ethics. USC is committed to Alzheimer’s disease research and building upon its strategic presence in the field of neuroscience, Quick said.

“We are proud to have ATRI as part of USC,” Quick said. “At the end of the day, it’s about making sure the science gets done. We saw an opportunity to attract an amazing group and allow them the freedom to continue the work they do. These scientists will help USC to continue our evolution of supporting great work.”

Alzheimer’s disease is the sixth-leading cause of death in the U.S. and one in three seniors dies from Alzheimer’s or other dementia, according to the Alzheimer’s Association. Alzheimer’s is the only disease among the top 10 in America that cannot be prevented, cured or slowed.

USC Verdugo Hills reaches tentative deal with union

By Mary Dacuma

USC Verdugo Hills Hospital has reached a tentative agreement on a three-year contract with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). USC Verdugo Hills Hospital employees represented by SEIU include certified nursing assistants and lab technicians.

“The collaborative efforts of all of our faculty and staff enable us to provide beyond excellent medical care to our community, and we are delighted to continue doing so alongside our SEIU employees,” said Keith Hobbs, CEO of USC Verdugo Hills Hospital.

SEIU members are expected to vote to ratify the contract this month. If ratified, the contract will be in effect through January 2019.

“Our agreement includes annual wage increases, additional paid time off and stronger financial support for additional training and education,” Hobbs said. “It serves the best interests of our employees while allowing us to operate efficiently in the increasingly competitive health care marketplace.”

The SEIU, which includes certified nursing assistants and lab technicians, represents 204 of USC Verdugo Hills Hospital’s 677 employees. The hospital has been in negotiations with the union since November 2015.

Lightboard studio brings new methods to faculty lectures

By Mary Dacuma

Lessons at the Keck School of Medicine are just more engaging. Using open-source plans from Northwestern University, a team of Keck School of Medicine faculty and staff built a user-friendly Lightboard studio to record or live-stream lectures.

A Lightboard is a large, illuminated glass board that can be written on using special grease pens. Unlike with traditional whiteboards that require instructors to turn their backs to the audience, the instructor can simply stand behind the glass to write and lecture more naturally. A camera in front of the Lightboard records the lesson as a mirror image so text reads normally without the instructor having to write backwards. The instructor can see the recording in real time on a television behind the camera, almost like looking into a mirror. During the recording, a video team can superimpose images translucent enough for the instructor to highlight and write on directly.

Patrick Cispen, EdD, director of educational technology at Aisen, Puliafito and Quick School, said, “Our agreement includes extended training and development, additional paid time off and annual wage increases, which will help us to continue our evolution of supporting great work.”

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Surgery robot arrives at USC Verdugo Hills

By Mary Dacuma

The USC Verdugo Hills Hospital has acquired a da Vinci Surgical System Robot. The device utilizes minimally invasive, robot-assisted procedures for surgery. It includes a surgeon's console, robotic arms, a high-definition camera, and a three-dimensional viewing system. The hospital plans to use this technology for prostate surgeries, robotic-assisted hysterectomies, and other minimally invasive procedures. The hospital's commitment to this technology underscores its dedication to providing patients with the latest surgical advancements.

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Carpten began his appointment as chair of USC’s new Department of Translational Genomics and as director of the new Institute of Translational Genomics on Jan. 1. Carpten joins USC’s collaborative effort to further “precision medicine,” which aims to provide patients with individually tailored medical treatment and drugs.

Carpten said he plans to hire seven to 10 foundational faculty members over the next five years, adding he may have between five to seven of them on board by mid-summer. Degree programs in innovative areas of biomedical research eventually may be offered, Carpten said.

“The department’s primary areas of focus are still being developed, but likely will include geriatric cancer, women’s cancers and other tumor types such as multiple myeloma. However, the department will not focus exclusively on cancer, he said.

“Other potentially ripe areas include neurological diseases, pediatric cancer and rare genetic syndromes,” Carpten said. “I am also deeply committed to understanding why certain diseases and disorders are more prevalent among different underrepresented populations.”

Stephen Gruber, MD, PhD, MPH, director of the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center, said Carpten is an international leader in cancer genetics and precision oncology, identifying mutations that create opportunities for targeted therapies directed toward each patient and each tumor.

“The new Translational Genomics Laboratory is an enormous asset not only for the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center, but also for the Keck health system,” Gruber said. “Hiring John Carpten and creating this new department will have a ripple effect across all of our USC campuses. This will help children with rare diseases at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles and cancer patients with previously untreatable diseases at USC Norris. It will transform our thinking through the application of new methods formulated in collaboration with our engineering, computational biology and chemistry colleagues at the University Park Campus.”

Before USC, Carpten worked at the Translational Genomics Research Institute in Arizona as deputy director of basic sciences and professor/division director of the Division of Integrated Cancer Genomics.

Carpten said he came to USC because it is more than just a research institution.

“USC allows future Translational Genomics faculty and me to bring translational components directly into the clinical enterprise,” he said. “Our ultimate goal is to bring to bear new technologies and molecular insights to help improve outcomes for USC patients.”

The new department and institute reside in the Hadyne J. Norris Research Tower, which is a wing of the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center and USC Norris Cancer Hospital.

Keck School outreach expands, neurology education in Cambodia

By Les Dumas

F or Heng Nhuong, a project specialist in the Department of Neurology, participating in a Keck School of Medicine of USC project to establish a neurology education curriculum in Cambodia is about more than work. It’s about a cause.

Nhuong’s parents fled their home in Cambodia to escape the communist Khmer Rouge, which executed 2.3 million Cambodians between 1975-1979 in a genocide that targeted the educated class.

“My parents are refugees. They went through the genocide and survived it,” Nhuong said.

His two older sisters were born in refugee camps in Thailand. Eventually, the family settled in the United States, arriving in 1988, before Nhuong was born.

The genocide — and the exodus of those who could escape it — left Cambodia, a country of 15 million people, with just a handful of doctors. Decades later, the level of medical care remains woefully inadequate.

Today, Nhuong is among a group of USC medical professionals who are trying to make things better. The effort, led by Soma Sahai-Srivastava, MD, associate professor of neurology and medical director of neurology clinics at Keck Medicine of USC, is a neurology outreach program for Cambodian health care professionals funded by a grant from the World Federation of Neurology.

“The ultimate goal is to begin the country’s first neurology residency program,” Sahai said. But there’s a lot to be done first.

The effort convened in Cambodia last July, when a small team from USC arrived in Phnom Penh, Cambodia’s capital city, to begin a three-week whirlwind visit that covered four communities and a half-dozen medical facilities.

They provided hands-on training and set about developing an appropriate undergraduate and residency neurology curriculum in collaboration with the country’s only government-accredited medical center, University of Health Sciences (UHS), which sets a curriculum in Cambodia for all academic institutions.

It wasn’t the first visit to Cambodia for Sahai, whose archeologist father had relocated from India to work there about 20 years ago. When she visited him, her heart went out to the people she met and the suffering they endured because of the country’s poor quality of medical care. She looked for opportunities to volunteer her services or assist in neurology clinics. But no such programs existed.

Then Sahai went in another direction. Instead of trying to treat patients herself, Sahai decided to focus her efforts on educating Cambodians to help themselves. She contacted the World Federation of Neurology and obtained a two-year grant to establish a toehold in neurology education in Cambodai.

“It has become my passion to help them, to create and educate the next generation of doctors there,” she said.

The next step was finding people at USC who could help. She started with Shri Mishra, MD, professor of neurology. “Then other doctors heard about it and signed up,” she said. The physicians joining Sahai and Mishra were Giselle Petzinger, MD, assistant professor of neurology, and Holly MacCallum, MD, chief resident in neurology, while Heng Nhuong served the vital role of interpreter and logistical coordinator.

“Whatever neurology terms the professors would be presenting in the classroom in English, my job was to try to clarify it for the Cambodian students in their language,” Nhuong explained.

Only two relatives, both on his mother’s side, remained in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge genocide, but the USC trip gave Nhuong an opportunity to reconnect with family there. During his time in Phnom Penh, for example, he stayed with relatives instead of at a hotel.

Even before the neurology team’s visit, Nhuong was cognizant of the low standard of medicine in Cambodia. He knew that his relatives there traveled to a neighboring Southeast Asian nation because of their distrust of Cambodia’s medical system, for example. Even so, the level of suffering he witnessed was unsettling.

During their trip, the USC group visited a rural area where they saw children with epilepsy and other neurological disorders that were basically untreated.

“It was very hard to see these kids that are suffering,” Nhuong recalled. “They are having seizures or they are developmentally not there. It’s not only that they have these disabilities, but they are living in such a poor country. What kind of life will they have?”

The USC group is steadfast in their determination to make the situation better. For instance, Nhuong is working with Sahai to build an online database of training materials that can be used by the Cambodians to improve their level of neurologic training. The USC group is utilizing a “train the trainers” approach, engaging in regular discussions by email and Skype.

This June, Sahai and her group from the Keck School will return to Cambodia to continue their neurology basic training program and provide more neurology toolkits.

Among their other goals is the establishment of the country’s first Neurology Skill Lab and development of a curriculum for neurology residency training, with a goal of launching it in the fall of 2016. It’s not too late to get involved, Sahai noted, and anyone who is interested can contact her directly at sahai@usc.edu.
Proteus Digital Health and VSP Global to deliver wireless, comes. “The CBC also is partnering with Doctor Evidence, the driver seat of their own health care experience and out physician-patient relationship by creating a contextualized experience that is supposed to offer,” said Leslie Saxon, MD, executive director of the USC Center for Body Computing (VCC), a program that can connect anyone who owns a smartphone with Keck Medicine of USC experts.

USC Norris Compehensive Cancer Center has joined 68 of the nation’s top cancer centers in a joint statement urging parents and physicians to vaccinate young people against Human Papillomavirus (HPV). “The HPV vaccine is a safe, effective way to prevent cancers that occur in both males and females,” said USC Norris Director Stephen Gruber, MD, PhD, MPH. “Because the recommended age for this vaccine is between 11-15 years old, parents should speak to their child’s pediatrician about taking this important health precaution.” Research shows barriers to improving HPV vaccination rates include parents not understanding that this vaccine protects against several types of cancer, including cervical, anal, oropharyngeal (middle throat) and other genital cancers. — Mary Dacuma

By Amanda Busick

A lumini, current scholar- recipients, parents and other leaders of the Keck School of Medicine of USC will gather to honor two very notable alumni and a beloved faculty member on March 12 at the 2016 Keck School Scholarship Gala. This year’s honorees all are people who have made a major impact on the Keck School and the medical field as a whole.

Donald Flax, MD, MACP, emeritus professor of medicine, who will receive the Distinguished Faculty Award. Feinstein is one of the most respected hematology-oncology doctors in the world and is designated a Master of the American College of Physicians. He continues to work at the Keck School even though he has been retired officially for eight years. The Distinguished Alumni Merit Award will go to Drew Pinsky, MD ’84, assistant professor of psychiatry, for his work as a health and wellness advocate and renowned media personality. His well-known work in the field of addiction medicine has been a great influence on how drug addiction and the people who suffer from it are treated.

Varma elected president of USC Care Medical Group

Robert Varma, MD, MPH, has been elected president of the clinical chairs of the Keck School of Medicine, a position that also serves as president of USC Care Medical Group, Keck Medicine of USC leaders announced recently. “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 Jackson, MD, MPH, senior vice president and CEO of Keck Medicine. “As president, Dr. Varma will coalesce the achievements of our practice into the greater University of Southern California academic and research communities, and collaborate with leadership across the health care enterprise.”

His appointment is in effect until June 30, 2017. Varma is an internationally recognized clinician and scientist recognized as a visionary leader in the epidemiology of eye diseases. He holds the Grace and Emery Beardsley Chair in Ophthalmology, serves as chair of the Department of Ophthalmology, is professor of ophthalmology and preventive medicine and is director of the USC Eye Institute. He earned his medical degree at the University of Delhi, India and a master’s degree in public health from Johns Hopkins University. He completed his residency in ophthalmology from The Johns Hopkins Hospital and a fellowship in glaucoma at USC.

Before becoming chair of the USC Department of Ophthalmology, Varma served as chair of the Department of Ophthalmology and Associate Dean for Strategic Planning at the University of Illinois College of Medicine in Chicago. He also is author to more than 247 publications in various peer reviewed ophthalmic journals and co-author of two ophthalmic books.

Varma succeeds John Niparko, MD, professor and chair of the USC Tina and Rick Caruso Department of Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery. Niparko served as the president of USC Care for more than two years, bringing stability to the medical group and health enterprise during a time of exciting changes.

Niparko moved into the role of past president of the Council of Clinical Chairs and will continue to play a role in the leadership of the medical group and clinical enterprise along- side Varma.

Scholarship Gala to honor alumni

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Michelle M. Cannis, MD ’77, former associate clinical professor, will receive the Distinguished Alumni Service Award. Cannis is the former president of the volunteer and support organization Salerno College Alumni Association. In addition to being a highly respected pediatrician and educator with a long-standing relationship with USC, she has given countless hours of service to the school as a volunteer.

USC Norris leaders cosign HPV vaccination statement

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