Pharmacy students mark beginning of a new journey

By Michele Keller and Divya Yerwa Mary

Taking the first steps in their journey to become Doctors of Pharmacy, the 192 members of the Class of 2021 entered the annual USC School of Pharmacy White Coat Ceremony on the Harry and Celenta Pappas Quad on Aug. 18.

Dean Vassilios Papadopoulos, D’Pharm, PhD, welcomed the first-year pharmacy students, along with their family members and friends.

“You have distinguished yourselves in your undergraduate years and we look upon you today with great expectations for what you will accomplish during your years in pharmacy school and in your eventual career,” Papadopoulos said.

He challenged the students to think beyond their degrees and focus on finding ways they, as future medication-based experts, can innovate and improve the delivery of health care.

The keynote speaker for the ceremony was William Heeres, PharmD, former chair of the USC School of Pharmacy Board of Councilors, who reflected on his own experience as a second-generation Trojan pharmacist.

“When you tell people you’re a USC pharmacist, it makes all the difference. They know you’re something special,” Heeres said. “In 1,500 days, you will become licensed pharmacists. The time will go by much too quickly. Today you become members of the Trojan family. That’s not for four years, taking the first steps in your journey to become Doctors of Pharmacy.

Study: Zika virus stifles mom’s weakened immune system

By Zen Vuong

The Zika virus, linked to congenital birth defects and miscarriages, suppresses a pregnant woman’s immune system, enabling the virus to spread and increasing the chances an unborn baby will be harmed, a Keck School of Medicine of USC study finds.

The study is the first to report that the Zika virus targets specific white blood cells, handicapping a pregnant woman’s immune system in a way that almost resembles HIV, said Jae Jung, PhD, senior author of the study.

“Pregnant women are more susceptible to Zika virus because pregnancy naturally suppresses a woman’s immune system so her body doesn’t reject the fetus — essentially it’s a foreign object,” said Jung, Distinguished Professor and chair of the Department of Molecular Microbiology and Immunology at the Keck School — among the nation’s leaders in innovative scientific discovery: “Our study shows pregnant women are more prone to immune suppression. Zika exploits that weakness to infect and replicate.”

The finding, published in Nature Medicine on Aug. 21, is an instrumental step to improving the fate of pregnant women and their unborn babies, said Jung.

Research funding programs available for investigators

By Adriana Cho

The Office of the Dean, in collaboration with departments and institutes of the Keck School of Medicine of USC, has announced two funding programs for FY18 that are designed to help Keck School faculty members obtain extramural research funding.

The Deans’ Pilot Funding Program targets full-time faculty members interested in launching a new research program or transitioning to a new area of research. Applicants should propose projects that will obtain preliminary data to support submission of new National Institutes of Health (NIH) R-series or other major research proposals. Letters of intent are optional and should be submitted to the Office of the Dean by Sept. 1 at https://tinyurl.com/ybuh6h9u. Full applications are due Sept. 29 and are accessible at https://tinyurl.com/ybg615t7. The Keck School Bridge Funding Program targets principal investigators who have had significant extramural funding, in particular NIH or other federal funding, within the past two years, are currently not funded but remain potentially competitive. Proposals for Bridge Funding must come from the faculty member’s department chair, must include matching funds, and must emphasize how funds will be used to support a proposal to renew extramural funding. Proposals should be submitted to Janet Stoeckert, director of research administration, at janet.stoeckert@usc.edu. For more information about these funding opportunities, visit http://keck.usc.edu/research-alerts.

USC Village makes its debut

The University Park Campus community celebrated the official opening of USC Village, a massive development at the corner of Hoover Street and Jefferson Boulevard. The Aug. 17 event included the unveiling of a 20-foot-tall bronze statue of Hecuba, Queen of Troy.

“This project has been a labor of love for all of us,” said USC President C. L. Max Nikias. “We built this village to show our enduring commitment to our exceptional students and our beloved neighbors.”

The development, which consists of six buildings spread over 15 acres, includes housing for undergraduate students, retail stores and restaurants. In addition to the flagship Target and Trader Joe’s stores, USC Roski Eye Institute will have a retail outlet to serve the community.

For more information about the USC Village, go to village.usc.edu.

Norris Healthcare Center set to open in January 2018

By Adriana Cho

Construction of the highly anticipated Norris Healthcare Center (HC3) is complete and the building is expected to be open to patients in January 2018.

Located on the USC Health Sciences Campus, this new healthcare center will further extend Keck Medicine of USC’s ability to provide outstanding care to patients. Further, it will decompress the Day Hospital and clinics in the USC Norris Cancer Hospital, allowing services to expand clinical offerings.

“The Norris Healthcare Center is a beautiful, modern facility that will provide a new, first-class space for our specialty care,” said Tom Jackiewicz, MPH, senior vice president and CEO of Keck Medicine of USC. “This new center is an important step during our journey to become the leading health care provider in Southern California.”
Professors discuss transforming health care through technology

By Nancy Sokoler Steiner

Carol J. Peden, MD, MPH, professor of clinical anesthesiology and director, Center for Health Systems Innovation, and Leslie A. Saxon, MD, professor of medicine (clinical scholar) and executive director, USC Center for Body Computing, are two Keck School of Medicine of USC faculty members on a mission to use technology to revolutionize health care.

They published some of their ideas in an article in the June 15 issue of NEJM Catalyst, and spoke with JBC News about their work and what they envision for the future of health care.

Where do you see the greatest need when it comes to technological innovation in health care?

Carol Peden: The people who are designing innovation are not the people who are the biggest users of health care. We have to think about designing for and engaging the most socially disadvantaged and elderly patients. I’ve seen lots of companies come up with great ideas, but there are challenges to integrating them into your system and testing them. We want to make sure that they will really add value, not just be a new shiny toy.

Carol J. Peden: We’ve really good sensors in smartphones, worn on the body and implantable. I implant cardiac rhythm management devices attached to remote Internet connections that are capable of unbelievable diagnostics. I can follow a thousand patients with implanted devices every day. I can look at a secure website and intervene before things happen. That saves lives and improves outcomes.

OP: That same idea can be used to help patients with chronic health issues. They don’t always have to travel to the hospital. They can check in more frequently electronically and their providers can receive more feedback. For at-risk patients, we’re looking at how we can enable them to stay in their own environments longer and how we can get feedback on their physiological state, which previously might have required the presence of a nurse or a doctor to take their vital signs.

Talk about the Virtual Care Clinic.

LP: We’re trying to create a new model of true patient engagement. The virtual care clinic is a construct where we build out the infrastructure in order to support on-demand care completely outside the walls of a medical center. This is how we think 80 percent of health care will be delivered in the future.

How can we use the technology we already have?

Leslie Saxon: We’ve really good sensors in smartphones, worn on the body and implantable. I implant cardiac rhythm management devices attached to remote Internet connections that are capable of unbelievable diagnostics. I can follow a thousand patients with implanted devices every day. I can look at a secure website and intervene before things happen. That saves lives and improves outcomes.

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Making USC a home base for emergency preparedness research

By Lex Davis

On April 15, 2013, terrorists struck the Boston Marathon, killing three people and wounding more than 260. Clinical staff across Boston’s hospitals did heroic work, treating those who suffered burns, fractures and more severe injuries as a result of the homemade bombs. The emergency response was quick and effective. The wounded were distributed evenly among the area’s five trauma centers.

But the caregivers faced a huge problem: There was no standard way to ask another hospital how many critical care beds were available or if it had supplies to spare. In some cases, individual doctors and nurses ended up texting friends at other hospitals for this vital information.

J. Perren Cobb, MD, professor of clinical surgery at the Keck School of Medicine of USC and chair of the advisory board for the new Critical Care Institute, was director of the critical care center at Massachusetts General Hospital at the time. After the attack, he was struck by the need for better communication between hospitals.

Inspired by those events, Cobb has been instrumental in the launch of Discovery PREP, an emergency preparedness program designed to help hospitals be ready for both predictable and unpredictable disasters, and to foster rapid collaboration between medical centers, federal agencies and industry suppliers. Keck Medicine of USC is leading a network of 20 nationwide program trial sites, run by the research network of the Society of Critical Care Medicine.

Cobb explained: “A well-designed system will allow us to collect and analyze data, test hypotheses and quickly share results across the country.”

Discovery PREP clinical trials are underway to develop standard approaches to real-time data collection, analysis and reporting. When that sharing is developed, hospitals will be able to rapidly share which treatments have worked best for them and help other hospitals deal with crises quickly and effectively, he said.

By Mary Dacuma

On July 2, a team of surgeons led by Inderbir S. Gill, MD, Distinguished Professor of Urology at the Keck School of Medicine of USC and executive director of the USC Institute of Urology, performed Mumbai’s first robotic kidney transplant at Sir H. N. Reliance Foundation Hospital and Research Centre.

This cutting-edge robotic technology replaces traditional open transplant surgery. During robotic surgery, the kidney, placed within an ice-filled bag, is inserted into the lower abdomen via a small, non-muscle-cutting incision next to the pubic bone. All three anastomoses — the arterial, venous and ureteral surgical connections — are performed robotically through keyhole incisions. This surgery is not yet offered at Keck Medicine of USC.

“Advancing robotic technology and minimally invasive surgery is our key focus area,” said Gill, who also is chair of the Catherine and Joseph Aresty Department of Urology and the Shirley and Donald Skinner Chair in Urologic Cancer Surgery at the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

“This is an advanced robotic procedure performed in only a few centers worldwide,” said Gill, who led a team of surgeons including Justin Trop, medical student, and Mellissa Baim, its very own surgeon on the surgical care team at Sir H. N. Reliance Foundation Hospital.

INDIVIDUALS ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED:

The 59-year-old recipient with renal failure received the kidney from his 55-year-old wife. The procedure was covered by numerous news outlets across India, including some of the country’s top newspapers.

For nearly four years, the USC Institute of Urology has been supporting the urology services at Sir H. N. Reliance Foundation Hospital and Research Centre, the newest major hospital in India.

Gill also serves as chair of urology and robotics at the hospital, which is a premiere 345-bed, multi-specialty, tertiary care institution dedicated to providing state-of-the-art patient care to all socioeconomic backgrounds. This is the university’s first example of active and formal clinical collaboration with an international partner.

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Department of Medicine faculty grow support through K-awards

By Eric Weintraub

Finding ways to support early career physician-scientists has been an ongoing priority for the Keck School of Medicine of USC. One of the strongest avenues to encourage research among the faculty through the school is the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Career Development Awards.

Known as K awards, these awards promote outstanding junior faculty and allow recipients to conduct their research independently to become competitive for major grant support. Multiple faculty members from the Keck School’s Department of Medicine currently hold these awards. “Identification of junior faculty physician-scientists is crucial to growing the research portfolio of the Department of Medicine,” said Edward Crandall, PhD, MD, chair and professor of medicine; Kenneth T. Norris, Jr., Chair of Medicine; Hastings Professor of Medicine; and director, Will Rogers Institute Pulmonary Research Center. “For several years, the department has had a policy of aggressively recruiting ‘K-quality’ junior physicians and acquiring K awards, which provide support for early career development. We look to these young investigators to contribute to a sustainable future for the department’s research footprint.”

As part of the awards, senior faculty members mentor each junior faculty investigator. Additionally, each awardee is advised on issues related to their career goals by a Career Planning Committee appointed by Laurie DeLeve, MD, PhD, professor of medicine and the department’s senior associate chair for scientific affairs.

Department of Medicine K award recipients include:

• Hossein Bahrami, PhD, MD, assistant professor of medicine, “Inflammation and Risk of Myocardial and Coronary Diseases in HIV Infected Patients,” under mentor Ray Matthews, MD, professor of clinical medicine and cardiovascular medicine division chief

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Compassion key to physician’s success

By Virginia Bacca

M ichael Wang, MD, believes it is important to treat each patient like family. Having recently lost a family member, he reminds himself that each patient is someone’s parent, sibling or child.

“I try to have a particular sensitivity to chronically ill pa-

tients and their families; I aim to understand their situations,” he explained. “Patients are in uncertain territory and making life-and-death decisions.”

This compassion has resulted in Wang being named a fellow in geriatric medicine at Keck School of Medicine of USC.

“Coming to USC is like coming home. I work and live near my family and treat the residents of my community,” he said.

In his free time, Wang enjoys spending time with his family, running and hiking.

Quoting Wang, associate professor of clinical medicine at Keck School of Medicine of USC, Dr. Michael Wang, MD, states, “We deliver care,” and his approach is “never about making a decision but about understanding your patient’s situation, their needs and concerns.”

Alzheimer’s disease researchers speak at women’s conference

FOC USAKECK MEDICINE OF USC’S leading Alzheimers’ experts talked about the disease and cutting-edge research at the fifth annual Deal With It conference, one of the largest basketball tournaments in Los Angeles. The tournament was hosted Aug. 4-6 at L.A. Live in downtown Los Angeles. The US Sports Medicine Center was the presenting sponsor of the first aid station during the tournament.

Alexander Weber, MD, assistant professor of clinical medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, was on site to assist with any sports-related injuries, along with clinical staff from USC Orthopaedic Surgery. Keck Medicine also hosted an information booth during the tournament.

From left, Danielle Vivens, Patima Mariquin, Alexander Weber, Rod Hanners, Sylvia Hernandez, Natasha Barutansimbali and Adah Doriga are seen in front of a first aid station.

Master’s student looks to future of stem cell research, medicine

By Crisy Lytal

E veryone in this audience (right now, you all started out as a stem cell,” Natasha Natarajan said at the 2017 TEDxUSC conference: “And then your DNA came in, did all the work, and differentiated each group of your stem cells into your muscles, into your heart, into your brain until we get the finished product you.”

Natarajan’s eyes sparkled as she described the potential of stem cell research — a passion of hers since she was 15 years old. As a student at Beverly Hills High School, she won a writing competition about stem cells hosted by Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. Her prize was the opportunity to work in a stem cell laboratory at UCLA.

“My kind of a stem cell geek,” said Natarajan, who graduated from USC with her bachelor’s degree in human biology and is now pursuing a graduate student’s degree in stem cell biology and regenerative medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

At USC, she took MEDS 380 Stem Cells: Fact or Fiction. During the course, Gage Ccrump, PhD, associate professor of stem cell biology and regenerative medicine, had discussions about stem cells in film, literature and the laboratory. Newly inspired, she joined the Crump Lab.

Natarajan also studied abroad in Oxford, England, and Cape Town, South Africa. “My dad is actually the first Indian surgeon from Johannesburg,” she said. “He left during apartheid. I did some volunteering and shadows in a hospital in South Africa, and it gave me a lot more context for what it must have been like for my dad.”

Natarajan intends to amplify her positive impact by pursuing medical school: “Being a physi-
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