Medical students don white coats

By Douglas Morino

One of medicine’s hallowed traditions was celebrated on a warm August afternoon at the Health Sciences Campus, as the Keck School of Medicine of USC incoming class of medical students donned their white coats for the first time.

“Your white coat represents an extraordinary privilege and a solemn responsibility,” said Rohit Varma, MD, MPH, dean of the Keck School.

“This is your first step down a path that will bring you much joy and great satisfaction.”

Physicians must not only commit to provide compassionate medical treatment, but also work to form strong, positive bonds with those in their care, Varma said at the Aug. 4 ceremony.

“At the Keck School of Medicine, we have long recognized the importance of the bond between physicians and their patients,” Varma added. “You have to continue to strive to be positive and optimistic with your patients. Your inner strength has no limits.”

The white coat ceremony is held at the start of each academic year, symbolizing the students’ first step on their journey in medicine. After receiving their white coats, each first-year medical student is all smiles after receiving their white coats for the first time on Aug. 4. The ceremony included a photo with Keck School Dean Rohit Varma, below left.

Hospitals ranked among nation’s best

By Mary Dacuma

For the ninth consecutive year, the hospitals of Keck Medicine of USC have been named among the best in the country by U.S. News & World Report, a distinction only 3 percent of the analyzed hospitals receive. The magazine’s annual “Best Hospitals” rankings recognize hospitals in the United States that provide the best overall patient care as well as specialized treatment in areas like urology and orthopaedics.

Keck Medical Center of USC, which consists of Keck Hospital of USC and USC Norris Cancer Hospital, was ranked among the Best Hospitals in both metro Los Angeles (No. 5) and the Best Hospitals in the United States that provide the best overall patient care each day, and we are honored to be recognized for these efforts.”

The medical center also performed well in a number of specialty rankings, securing a Top 50 placement in five specialties. The USC Roski Eye Institute remained the institution’s top performing service line for the 24th consecutive year (No. 11). The USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center received its highest-ever ranking (No. 15). Keck Medical Center was again ranked among the Top 25 for Orthopedics (No. 24) and the Top 50 for Geriatrics (No. 27) and Urology (No. 29).

USC-VHH thrives with new leadership

By Mary Dacuma

Four years ago, Keck Medicine of USC welcomed USC Verdugo Hills Hospital (USC-VHH), a long-standing fixture in the Glendale and La Cañada Flintridge community, to the medical enterprise. In December 2015, the hospital recruited Keith Hobbs, who held multiple leadership positions at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles for more than 20 years, to serve as its new CEO.

Over the last year and a half the hospital has made incredible strides. Hobbs spoke with HSC News about USC-VHH’s progress, as well as the hospital’s future and continued growth.

D-Health Lab holds summer Innovation Series

By Leigh Bailey

Innovation in medicine, the role of groundbreaking technology and venture capital were the subjects of an engaging and well-attended conversation between Rohit Varma, MD, MPH, dean of the Keck School of Medicine of USC, and renowned angel investor David Lee, JD, MS, co-founder and managing partner of Refactor Capital, which describes itself as a $50 million venture capital fund designed to “invest in founders creating startups that will bring you much joy and great satisfaction.”

The discussion, held July 18 on the Health Sciences Campus, was the latest installment in the Innovation Series, sponsored by USC Digital Health (D-Health) Lab, a health care innovation lab established in collaboration with Keck Medicine of USC to address the challenges facing modern health care providers today.

“The purpose of the innovation series is to convene thought leaders at USC, Keck Medicine, and the greater L.A. community to discuss how we can drive the culture of innovation here, and better impact our communities,” D-Health director Karthik Murali, PhD, explained to the audience.

Lee and Varma, he said, “are both very mission-driven, and both believe in the value of using technology for public good.”

Lee, who was named one of the top technology investors by Forbes magazine, is considered by many to be a visionary in start-up investing circles. Prior to Refactor, he was the managing partner of SV Angel.
**New procedure reduces stroke risk for carotid stents**

By Lex Davis

Plaque buildup in the main artery to the brain, known as carotid artery disease, can cause a stroke. Surgically opening up the artery to clear the blockage is the most direct solution, but when the artery is unplugged, there is a small risk that debris can be released into the bloodstream and cause a stroke.

Inserting a stent to open up the artery is a minimally invasive alternative, but also can pose a risk of embolic stroke when the stent is inserted into the femoral artery and guided through the bloodstream to the heart.

Wang Sun Ham, MD, assistant professor of clinical surgery at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, has led a new minimally invasive technique called transcatheter carotid artery recanalization (TCAR). The procedure reduces the risk of stroke with a device that reverses the flow of blood away from the brain and filters out debris from the bloodstream.

“Carotid artery endarterectomy and conventional carotid stenting are both safe and effective ways to treat the carotid artery occlusive disease,” Ham said. “But TCAR is a hybrid of both procedures that is minimally invasive and a potentially safer alternative for older patients.”

One of the device’s catheters is inserted into the carotid artery and a second goes into the femoral vein in the groin. Because the pressure in the artery is greater than that in the vein, blood temporarily reverses during the placement of the stent. Any debris is carried away from the brain and captured by the device’s filter. The 30-day risk of stroke is only 1.4 percent, compared to 4.1 percent for a traditional stenting procedure, Ham said, citing results of this new procedure.

Surgeons must be trained and certified by the manufacturer in order to use the device, so the TCAR procedure is not widely available. Ham noted that by having another option available for treating carotid artery plaque, each patient could be matched with a safe procedure that best suits their individual needs.

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**Holly Muir talks experience, plans for anesthesiology**

By Mary Dacuma

Holly Muir, MD, has been leading the Department of Anesthesiology at the Keck School of Medicine of USC since January. She specializes in obstetric anesthesia and has published extensively on the management of acute and chronic pain. Her research previously spent 18 years at Duke University School of Medicine. She spoke with USC News about her background and what her plans are for the department.

How did you get into the field? I have been in this field for more than 30 years, but when I finished my internship I thought I wanted to be a surgeon. Even still, it was very trendy back then to work in family medicine — then called general practice — so I spent a year working in the community. It was a small town, and I covered the emergency room shift and really got to know the anesthesiologists. I saw the skill set they had and the scope of their responses, and I always liked the essence of anesthesiology, which is pharmacology and physiology.

What is something that might be a surprise to learn about this field? Anesthesia is often viewed as a hospital-based profession, but we touch a lot of areas. We can be facilitators of growth and development, and as a result, people may not be aware of the skill set required to succeed in this field. This is why one of my goals for the department is to increase our visibility within the enterprise.

Do you have any hobbies or unusual interests that you'd like to share? I am actively engaged in global health and have traveled to both Africa and Haiti to work on global health missions. My biggest project was in Ghana. I was one of the key department leaders for a nurse anesthetist training program with which I continue to work. My passion is extending into the global community, which does not necessarily mean I have to go across the ocean. I am interested in community affairs and how I can help the local community outside of my health center.

Is there something about yourself that you want people to know? My major focus when I come to work on the clinical side is always the patient. I strongly advocate for patients getting best possible care, no matter what the clinical arena I am working in. I was a bit of a radical in the 1970s, advocating for women’s rights, which is why I went into obstetrics. I continue to be an advocate for women in medicine, to ensure they are treated fairly and that their needs are respected. In fact, I am a strong advocate for personal rights for anybody, which is why I am interested in human rights.

What are your plans for the department? I want to develop a program for the Department of Anesthesiology to foster academic and professional growth for the department. Moreover, I would like to strengthen our department’s relationships with both the health center and the university.

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**Calendar of Events**

**Friday, Aug. 11**


**Tuesday, Aug. 15**


**Tuesday, Aug. 22**


**Thursday, Aug. 24**


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**Holly Muir**

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**INNOVATION: Topics included investment strategy, entrepreneurs in public health**

Continued from page 1

where he invested in companies like Airbhh, Oscar Health, Dropbox and Pinterest.

Varma is one of the highest-funded ophthalmologists by the National Institutes of Health in the world and an early investor for his research for more than two decades. Currently, in addition to serving as dean of the Keck School, Varma is pursuing new imaging technology that could improve early diagnosis of optic nerve damage in people with glaucoma.

Varma opened the conversation by asking Lee about his investment strategy.

Lee said that the founder of the company was one of the most important factors to consider. “What is it about them that’s unique?” he explained. “One: Not too late is 40 and I’m looking at someone who is 22 and I’ll ask myself, would I work for this person? Would I follow this person?”

Another factor was how the core idea of the company translates. Lee added. A successful start-up “has to be able to take something very complex and not only explain it but get you excited about it,” he said.

Varma spoke about his career-long interest in community and public health, noting that it isn’t an area that attracts a lot of technological interests. “What can one see more of this sort of entrepreneurial work in that public health space?” he asked Lee.

“Th city younger generation today, for whatever reason, really thinks about the greater good,” Lee responded. “I think for someone who is 24 or 25, with a background in public health, there’s someone out there who is unstoppable, who will just say, I don’t have a choice but to do this. This is all I think about and failure is not an option.”

Cultivating and nurturing that kind of mind set is an integral part of the Keck School education, Varma explained.

“We’re working to create a culture of innovation at Keck Medicine and the Keck School, in health and in other areas as well,” Varma said.

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**David Lee, left, and Rohit Varma speak during the July 18 Innovation Series.**

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**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 hscnews.usc.edu/calendar-of-events. Submit items at tinyurl.com/calendar-hsc. Include day, date, time, title of talk, first and last name of speaker, affiliation of speaker, location and a phone number/email address.
The Family Medicine Interest Group (FMIG) at the Keck School of Medicine of USC received a Program of Excellence Award from the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) based on overall excellence, the program was honored in July at the AAFP’s national conference. Jo Marie Reilly, MD, is the faculty adviser for the FMIG and has been integral to seeing the program grow.

“The FMIG leadership team has done a fabulous job in promoting the breadth, depth and diversity of family medicine at the Keck School,” said Reilly, professor of clinical family medicine. “Their passion and dedication to learn and share family medicine with the community is exemplary.”

Students participate in diverse health care experiences with patients of all ages, getting involved in activities that include providing comfort to high-risk infants in the Cuddle Club, volunteering in an interprofessional program in senior housing complexes, and leading a fitness initiative called Ready, Set, Fit. Third-year medical student and FMIG Co-President Serena Lui traveled to the conference to accept the award with some of her classmates. “Our dedication motivated us to organize two yearlong pediatric community service programs, six lunch talks and dinners, two community health fair booths, a skills workshop and many mentorship opportunities over the past year,” said Reilly. “The value and strength of our team allowed us to dive deep into the many facets of family medicine and explore our passions.”

In a press release announcing the awards, the AAFP highlighted the importance of encouraging more medical students to choose a career in primary care.

“It is critical we continue to garner interest and attract students to the specialty of family medicine,” said Clif Knight, MD, president and CEO of the AAFP. “These students to real-world experiences that will help them dig deeper into — and ultimately choose — family medicine.”

Continued from page 1

New facilities at USCD/VHH will help them dig deeper into — and ultimately choose — family medicine.

Continued from page 1

At the start of one of the greatest journeys life has to offer,” said Henri Ford, MD, MBA, vice dean for medical education and professor of surgery at the Keck School. “Few other professions can boast such a significant impact on the lives of others.”

Students come to the Keck School from across the U.S. and world. The Class of 2021 is composed of 186 first-year medical students from 56 universities. They are often their patients, said keynote speaker Stephanie Zia, MD, clinical assistant professor of medicine (clinician educator) and assistant dean for career advising.

“You have the opportunity to interact with patients from the first step and work with exceptional faculty members,” said Zia. “I was attracted to the Keck School because of the opportunity to interact with patients around the clock, which will result in better patient care, shorter length of stay and improved patient satisfaction. We have hired more than 40 new nurses in just this year alone, thanks in no small part to a new contract with expanded benefits and competitive wages. Employee satisfaction continues to rise, with more than 95 percent of our employees agreeing or strongly agreeing that USC VHH is a great place to work. Our Emergency Department also was the team recipient of the Choir Family Award for Excellence in Patient-Centered Care.”

Our technology investments include the da Vinci Surgical System surgical robot, a high-intensity fluorescence ultraviolet disinfectant system, a Xenex disinfection robot for superbug infections, allowing us to expand our services and provide added edge.

What other changes are on the horizon? We will open the doors of our newborn intensive care unit in 2022, and start our refresh of the labor and delivery department. We are expanding our surgical services at the hospital, providing the community with even more specialty care in their own backyard. And we soon will be adding a series of Women’s Health seminars to our roster of community events.

Student group recognized nationally in family medicine

By Claire Norman

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Continued from page 1

When you arrived at USC-VHH, what were some of the challenges you identified with the hospital over the last year? Our quality and safety ratings have increased. Our technology investments include the da Vinci Surgical System surgical robot, a high-intensity fluorescence ultraviolet disinfectant system, a Xenex disinfection robot for superbug infections, allowing us to expand our services and provide added edge.

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WHITE COAT: Family, friends attend milestone event to support students

Continued from page 1

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From high school to stem cell lab

By Cristy Lytal

Even though Richard Lopez still in high school, he can already tell you a thing or two about the ureteric bud, the metanephric mesenchyme and the developing kidney. More impressively, he was familiar with those terms before starting his summer internship in the lab of Andy McMahon, PhD, kidney researcher, W.M. Keck Provost Professor of Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine and Biological Sciences at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, and director of the All and Edythe Broad Center for Regenerative Medicine and Stem Cell Research at USC.

“I knew I was going to come here,” he said. “So from December on, I was just reading papers that were written by Dr. McMahon’s lab.” Lopez shared this intense preparation as part of the Science Research Program at his boarding school, Chase Rosemary Hall in Connecticut. Lopez didn’t start his high school career off with a bang. Growing up in Lennon, a neighborhood near the Los Angeles International Airport, he attended the local public schools until his sophomore year in high school. At that point, his exceptional scores on the California Standardized Test (CST) attracted the attention of the Young Eisner Scholar program, which empowers underserved students to fulfill their potential. As a Young Eisner Scholar, he earned both admission and a full scholarship to Choate.

“The McMahon Lab, Lopez has learned about the molecular signals that drive the branching development of the kidney and practiced a wide range of laboratory techniques.

To get to the lab every day, Lopez rides his bicycle for the 32-mile round trip from his home in Lennon to USC’s Health Sciences Campus. He’s lost the Los Angeles Marathon once and the San Francisco Marathon twice. In November, he’s planning to celebrate his 18th birthday with his first Ironman Triathlon — as a way to give back.

“I was very lucky,” he said. “So I want to raise money for the scholarships that have helped me on the way.”

Five questions with Annette Sy

By Douglas Morino

Annette Sy, DNP, RN, chief nursing officer, Keck Medical Center of USC, began her career at a small community hospital in rural Illinois, doing bedside care and sleep medicine at the Keck School and inaugural Chair in Medicine, chief of the division of pulmonary, critical care and sleep medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of USC. In contrast, activating this gene in zebrafish decreased the number of MNDCMs and a limited capacity for regeneration found in zebrafish and newborn mammals. Adult mammals have few MNDCMs and a limited capacity for regeneration. — Cristy Lytal

Richard Lopez, a student at Chase Rosemary Hall in Connecticut, spent his summer internship in the lab of Andy McMahon. In the McMahon Lab, Lopez has learned about the molecular signals that drive the branching development of the kidney and practiced a wide range of laboratory techniques.

Hastings Foundation board of directors meet

The Hastings Foundation’s board of directors recently met on the Health Sciences Campus, joined by Rohit Varma, MPH, dean of the Keck School of Medicine of USC; Thomas Bushman, MD, vice dean for research at the Keck School; and Zea Borok, MD, professor of medicine, Ralph Edgington Chair in Medicine, chief of the division of pulmonary, critical care and sleep medicine at the Keck School and inaugural director of the Hastings Center for Pulmonary Research. The Hastings Foundation is a longstanding supporter of pulmonary research at the Keck School, donating more than $33 million, including a recent $7.5 million gift to launch the Hastings Center for Pulmonary Research.

Chief quality and patient safety officer appointed

Santhi Iyer Kumar, MD, assistant professor of clinical medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, has been appointed chief quality and patient safety officer of Keck Medical Center of USC. Reporting to Chief Medical Officer Stephanie Hall, MD, Kumar will work in close partnership with the Associate Administrator of Quality and Outcomes Linda Barrata, RN, to ensure the delivery of high-quality, effective, safe and patient-centered care across Keck Medical Center USC. Additionally, Kumar will collaborate with leadership and staff throughout the organization to achieve outstanding performance on key, nationally standardized metrics of quality and safety. — Douglas Morino

Discovery uncovers new ways to refresh the heart

Some people are better at others at recovering from a wounded heart, according to a new study published Aug. 7 in Nature Genomics. In the study, first author Michaela Patterson, a postdoctoral scholar – fellowship trainee at the Keck School of Medicine of USC who works in the laboratory of Henry Sucov, PhD, senior author and professor of stem cell biology and regenerative medicine, and her colleagues focused on a regenerative type of heart muscle cell called a mononuclear diploid cardiomyocyte (MNDCM), commonly found in zebrafish and newborn mammals. Adult mammals have few MNDCMs and a limited capacity for regeneration after an injury such as a heart attack. The researchers then identified a key gene underlying this variation: Tnni3k. By identifying this gene in mice, the researchers produced higher percentages of MNDCMs and enhanced heart regeneration. In contrast, activating this gene in zebrafish decreased MNDCMs and impaired heart regeneration. — Cristy Lytal

Santali Kumar

From left, Zea Borok, John H. Reith, Rohit Varma, Michael Gurnatch and Richard H. Zane are among defining members of the Hastings Foundation board of directors, July 17 on the Health Sciences Campus.

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