Community gets look at future of health care

By Mary Dacuma

Membros of the La Cañada Flintridge and Glendale communities gathered at USC Verdugo Hills Hospital recently to look into the future of the medical enterprise, at the Keck Medicine of USC San Gabriel Valley Regional Reception.

The March 22 event, one of five regional gatherings, was created to engage alumni, parents, grateful patients and friends, while introducing the new Keck Medicine leadership and highlighting the exciting academic medical research, teaching and patient care taking place at Keck Medicine. Keith Hobbs, CEO of USC-VHH, hosted the event, welcoming all the attendees, including Mary Hoyagianian, district representative for Rep. Adam Schiff. Tom Jackiwecz, MPH, senior vice president and CEO of Keck Medicine, provided a positive update on the medical enterprise. He praised the success at USC-VHH, citing the installation of the da Vinci robot, expanded specialized services with Keck School of Medicine of USC faculty and the upcoming neonatal intensive care unit as examples of the work being done at the hospital.

He also talked about the plans for the new hospital on the Health Sciences Campus, which will be designed around the future of health care, ensuring that Keck Medicine continues to provide exceptional standards of care for future generations.

See COMMUNITY, page 3

USC team wins global health case competition

By Larissa Puro

Three students from the Keck School of Medicine of USC were part of a cross-campus team that won the international Emory University Global Health Case Competition, joining the elite few to have clinched first place in the event’s seven years.

With a $6,000 check in hand, the students returned to Los Angeles after a surreal whirlwind week in Atlanta synthesizing ideas into their research-backed, million-dollar proposal — and presenting it to global experts.

The team included Keck School Master of Public Health students Ashley Millhouse and Hrant Gevorgian; human biology and MPH progressive degree undergraduate Cristina Gago, from the Keck School and USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences; USC Price School of Public Policy Master of Public Administration students Brantynn Washington and Julian Cernuda; and USC Viterbi School of Engineering doctoral candidate Zaki Hasnain, MS.

A week before competition day, 24 student teams from Australia, Canada, Denmark and the United States were tasked to propose programs addressing children’s mental health needs in Liberia. The West Africa nation is expanding its mental health services in the wake of civil war and Ebola.

Setting aside classes, assignments, jobs and carnations were handed to patients. Several hundred patients also were honored by grateful patients and caregivers who wanted to thank physicians for their commitment to exceptional patient care on National Doctors’ Day, March 30. Physicians at Keck Hospital of USC and USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center were treated to breakfast and each received a Keck Medicine of USC golf umbrella. USC Verdugo Hills Hospital physicians were treated to a dinner reception with carnival games and a raffle.

Along with being recognized by their colleagues, physicians were treated to breakfast and each received a Keck Medicine of USC golf umbrella. USC Verdugo Hills Hospital physicians were treated to a dinner reception with carnival games and a raffle.

Hospital lauded for patient financial communications team

By Douglas Morino

Keck Hospital of USC has been nationally recognized for consistently providing high-quality customer service and financial communications to patients. The award — the National Recognition for Excellence in Financial Interactions with Patients — is given by the Healthcare Financial Management Association (HFMA) and recognizes best practices to strengthen communications with patients about often-complex financial matters.

“For most of our patients, the last thing they want to deal with is the financial aspect of their care,” said Randy Ray, associate administrator of revenue cycle services, Keck Medicine of USC.

“But our priority is helping patients understand what their options are.”

To make sure that communications with patients about often-complex financial matters.

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Dang becomes California’s first advanced practice pharmacist

By Michele Keller

Richard Dang, PharmD, assistant professor of clinical pharmacy at the USC School of Pharmacy, recently became California’s first advanced practice pharmacist.

Pharmacists are eligible to earn an advanced practice pharmacist license by meeting two of the following three criteria: (1) finishing a residency training program; (2) providing at least 1,500 hours of direct patient care services; and (3) earning certification or completing an advanced practice pharmacist certificate training program.

“Pharmacists in California have been providing advanced clinical services for decades in licensed health care facilities,” said Dang, who has been providing advanced clinical services since 1993. He has also completed an advanced practice pharmacist certificate program.

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Joanna Smeeton tapped for Broad Fellow

By Cristy Uytلف

UC Stem Cell scientist Joanna Smeeton, PhD, known for her achievements in regenerative medicine, has been awarded the 2017 Howard H. Berman Fellowship from the University of Southern California (USC) Keck School of Medicine.

The fellowship, established in 2009, provides a three-year fellowship with a stipend of $140,000 a year to support research projects under the mentorship of a senior university faculty member. The recipient is chosen based on their potential for high-impact research.

Joanna Smeeton, a postdoctoral scholar in the Department of Developmental and Regenerative Biology at USC, has been working on the genetic basis of congenital heart defects. Her research has uncovered the gene IFT88, which is linked to the development of the heart.

"This year's Berman Fellow, Joanna Smeeton, has already made tremendous contributions to our understanding of congenital heart defects," said Pedro Sanchez, MD, a professor of pediatrics at the Keck School.

Smeeton's research focuses on identifying the genes and pathways involved in the development of the heart, with the ultimate goal of finding new treatments for congenital heart defects.

"This fellowship will allow me to continue my research on congenital heart defects and explore new avenues of inquiry," said Smeeton.

The Berman Fellowship is named after Howard H. Berman, MD, a prominent cardiologist and researcher at USC who made significant contributions to the field of cardiology.

University researchers close to identifying crucial gene for human cleft lip and palate

By Zen Vuong

A group of researchers has discovered that three siblings born with cleft lip and palate share a common gene mutation associated with the birth defect.

The gene — intraflagellar transport 88 (IFT88) — ensures transportation antennae (cilium) on embryonic cells travel to the right place, enabling the development of cartilage, bone and smooth muscle.

"Finding this birth defect in every single child in a family is like catching lightning in a bottle because it allowed us to pinpoint the gene mutation that is probably responsible," said Yang Chai, DDS, PhD, senior author of the study and director of the Center for Craniofacial Molecular Biology at the Herman Ostrow School of Dentistry of USC.

"Our finding that the IFT88 gene is involved in cleft lip and palate is unlikely to be mere coincidence."

However, because this study involved only three children, Chai said more investigation is needed to find a causal relationship.

The study — a collaborative effort between the Ostrow School, the Keck School of Medicine of USC, Children's Hospital Los Angeles and the Operation Smile Operation — was published in the journal Human Molecular Genetics in January. Operation Smile, an international nonprofit that provides free facial surgeries in developing countries, found and provided support to three siblings — two boys and a girl — in Mexico who were born with cleft lip and palate.

"Their mother did not have surgery, but their father did. Surgeons at CHLA repaired the orofacial cleft and palate, and brought them home, I should be giving credit to them," said Smeeton.

The opening of the Colombia mission on April 8, 2017, enabled the development of the gene IFT88, which is needed to find a causal relationship. However, because this study involved only three children, Chai said more investigation is needed to find a causal relationship.

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"I know that any second that I'm away from home with them, I should be giving my 100 percent and really drilling down on the important questions we want to ask."
COMMUNITY
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Rohit Varma, MD, MPH, dean of the Keck School and director of the USC Eye and Ear Institute, followed with remarks on his vision for the medical school, which includes two important initiatives: digital health and precision care.
He touched on the school’s strategy to take full advantage of collaborations with schools across the university, such as with the university’s cinema and engineering schools, to produce better, more comprehensive health care solutions.
Varma also announced recent notable accomplishments, including hiring new chairs of anesthesiology and psychiatry and behavioral sciences.

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around financial matters were both appropriate and accurate, the hospital launched a new customer service division for financial services in August 2016, bringing crucial services to Keck Medical Center of USC that were once performed 3,000 miles away in a call center in New Jersey.
The goal of the Keck Medicine Financial Services Division is to simplify the financial collection process and make it more understandable for patients through concise, friendly communications, Ray said.
“Our team partners with each patient to help them understand the financial aspects of their care and how to meet their obligations through a number of options, including payment plans, financial assistance and discounts,” he explained.
A total of 12 Keck Medicine customer service representatives and management employees demonstrated close to 100 best practices for financial interactions that take place in a variety of care settings, according to HFMA’s annual event.
When people are dealing with health issues, they should be focusing on their health, not trying to decipher confusing financial information,” Fifer said. “Keck Hospital of USC has demonstrated its commitment to ensuring that patients have a good experience when it comes to the financial aspects of their care.”

COMPETITION: New customer service division launched in 2016

Members of the Keck Medicine of USC Financial Services Division are seen with Randy Pay, at right.

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HSC News

Institute to lead in critical care

By Hope Hamashige

Critical care is a medical subspecialty that is growing in importance. When it is done well, critical care can improve patient outcomes, decrease length of stay and reduce overall costs of care.

So to promote excellence in the delivery of critical care services, the Keck Medical Center of USC recently created the Critical Care Institute in collaboration with the Keck School of Medicine of USC, with an aim toward both providing excellent critical care and furthering translational and interdisciplinary research into best practices and innovation in the field.

“The overarching goal of the Critical Care Institute is to bring together physicians from different specialties who provide critical care services,” explained Rod Hanners, chief operating officer of Keck Medicine of USC, CEO of Keck Medical Center and one of the institute’s five board members. “Working together across disciplines to align policies and practices is one way the team at Keck Medical Center can promote the delivery of excellent care in our various intensive care units.”

In addition, the Critical Care Institute is ideally positioned to promote innovative protocols and practices that will enhance the level of critical care both at Keck Medicine and at other medical facilities.

“While there are best-practice protocols in critical care that help achieve optimal results for patients, these protocols are not widely adhered to at a national level,” said J. Perren Cobb, MD, professor of clinical surgery and director of surgical critical care. “As one of the country’s leading medical centers, we can serve as model for excellence to other centers, both here in California and around the country.”

“Keck Medical’s Critical Care Institute will help ensure delivery of excellent care to our sickest patients,” said Zee Boris, MD, professor of medicine and director of medical critical care. “Metrics and protocols with which to measure and improve quality of care will be important aspects of our processes moving forward.”

To this end, the Critical Care Institute is taking part in the ICU Liberation Campaign, a national effort to promote ICU best practice sponsored by the Society of Critical Care Medicine, which, along with the American Thoracic Society and the American College of Chest Physicians, is dedicated to advancing excellence in critical care delivery and research.

Grant funds lung cancer screenings for low-income communities

By Leigh Bailey

It’s one of those unfortunate ironies in health care: Often, those at greatest risk for serious illness are also least likely to have access to treatment or diagnosis options.

That’s especially true when it comes to lung cancer, which disproportionately affects low-income communities.

But thanks to the efforts of a team of Keck School of Medicine of USC doctors, researchers and radiology clinical research personnel in partnership with community partnerships led by the USC Civic Engagement office, more than 400 low-income residents from traditionally high-risk populations have had a chance to catch a potentially deadly disease early while helping further lung cancer research in the bargain.

In March 2015, Keck Medicine’s goal of Radiology was awarded a grant of more than $500,000 from the California Foundation to fund two years of free lung cancer screenings via low-dose CT scans for residents of some of the poorest communities in Los Angeles County.

Traditionally, the standard of care has been an X-ray of the lungs, but according to Christopher Lee, MD, associate professor of clinical radiology at the Keck School of Medicine of USC and the program’s principal investigator, “X-rays can really only catch advanced cancer, for which the five-year survival rates are fairly low.”

With low-dose CT screening, the prognosis is much better.

“If doctors can catch it at an early stage, patients can have surgery, resection and chemotherapy, and that results in what is essentially a cure, with five-year survival rates of 80 or even 90 percent,” he said.

Working in partnership with the Watts Health Foundation, the institute concentrated on populations in the Centenela Valley, which includes Ingledowell, parts of Hawthorne, Lomita, Los Angeles, Watts, Compton and Lawndale.

In addition to the CT screening, many participants are providing blood samples to be used to help develop novel biomarker panels for early detection of lung cancer, according to Blushani Desai, MBBS, MS, assistant professor of research radiology at the Keck School.

USC Norris celebrates friends and family at luncheon

Stephen B. Gruber, MD, PhD, MPH, director of the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center, and Alan S. Wayne, MD, professor of pediatrics (clinical scholar) at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, addressed guests at the USC Norris Friends and Family Luncheon on March 23.

Wayne, who is associate director for pediatric oncology at USC Norris, directed the Children’s Center for Cancer and Blood Diseases at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, the head of the division of hematology, oncology and blood and marrow transplantation in the Department of Pediatrics, and director of the Pediatric Hematolgy/Oncology Fellowship Training Program, spoke to gathered donors, volunteers and friends of USC Norris about his leukemia research.

Annual recital returns with student, faculty musicians

Students, faculty and staff were treated to a lunchtime recital hosted by the Keck Music Society recently. The March 20 event at Mayer Auditorium featured medical students and faculty members performing a variety of musical pieces for the audience.

By Erica Rheinschild

Grantee scholars and recipients perform Sunday Morning Serenity by Domingo de Ortega during the first recital.

Welcome to HSC News

HSC News is published for the faculty, staff, students, volunteers and visitors in the University of Southern California’s Health Sciences Campus community. It is produced by keck Medicine Marketing and Communications staff. Permission to reprint articles is available upon request. No artwork may be reproduced without the creator’s consent.

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Submit contributions to the Editor, Melissa Masatani, melissa.masatani@usc.edu. Contributions must have a title, byline and photo (if applicable) and be submitted as a Word document.

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