

# Tiny worm leads Massry Prize winners to huge medical insight

By Ryan Ball

Gary Ruvkun has come a long way from living in his van after being denied medical school admission by USC and UCLA in the early 1970s.

He and fellow molecular biologist Victor Ambros recently received the prestigious Meira and Shaul G. Massry Prize for their revolutionary research in micro RNA (miRNA). Ruvkun, now a Harvard professor, and Ambros, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, presented lectures on their findings in Mayer Auditorium on Nov. 12.

MiRNA are single-stranded RNA molecules that regulate gene expression. When Ambros and Ruvkun discovered these tiny strips of genetic material just over a decade ago, they set off an explosion in the field of genetic research.

“None of us had been thinking of looking for something that small,” Ruvkun commented during his lecture at USC. “We’ve been riding this wave, and it’s been an amazing ride.”

Ruvkun and Ambros independently began studying the presence and role of miRNA in tiny roundworms known as *C. elegans*. They eventually joined forces to push their research further. The result was the breakthrough discovery that RNA, like proteins, can regulate the actions of DNA, slowing genes down, speeding them up or turning them off and on. It was previously believed that RNA was merely a carrier of DNA instructions.



Gary Ruvkun



Victor Ambros

“In an effort to understand a little worm a little better, working together we’ve accomplished much more than we ever imagined we would,” said Ambros.

Like it or not, we are genetically only a few base pairs removed from worms, and the work of Ambros, Ruvkun and others in the field are likely to change the way diseases are treated in humans. The knowledge that miRNAs are linked to certain types of cancer and genetic diseases can potentially lead to the development of new life-saving drugs.

“It’s a tremendous discovery,” remarked Shaul G. Massry, professor emeritus of medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of USC and founder of the Meira and Shaul G. Massry Foundation. “It opened a new field and a new understanding of how the genome really functions. In essence, it’s trying to decipher the secret of life—how we come to be what we are.”

The Massry Prize was established in 1996 to recognize outstanding contributions to the biomedical sciences and the advancement of health. Massry this year turned over management of the award to USC to ensure that it will continue to promote education and research

in nephrology, physiology and related fields well into the future.

“I feel loyalty to USC,” Massry explained. “I’ve been doing [the Massry Prize] now for 13 years and I’m not going to live

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**“In an effort to understand a little worm a little better, working together we’ve accomplished much more than we ever imagined we would.”**

**— Victor Ambros, professor of molecular medicine at the University of Massachusetts**

## USC updates policy governing relationships with industry

By Sara Reeve

Responding to the American Association of Medical College’s (AAMC) challenge to universities to instill transparency with regard to relationships with industry, the deans of the Keck School of Medicine, the USC School of Pharmacy and the USC School of Dentistry announced an update to the university’s policy.

In a memo to faculty and staff sent on Nov. 2, Keck School Dean Carmen A. Puliafito, School of Dentistry Dean Avishai Sadan and School of Pharmacy Dean R. Pete Vanderveen wrote that while relationships with industry have been vital to discovering and developing new technologies and treatments, “under no circumstances can we allow these collaborations to have or appear to have improper influence over our core missions of education,

research and patient care.”

The policy provides new guidance in a variety of areas, several of which were highlighted in the memo to faculty and staff:

- Consulting arrangements with outside organizations must now be disclosed, reviewed and approved prior to beginning work, effective Jan. 1, in order to ensure they do not present a conflict of interest or commitment, and must be disclosed to students, residents and fellows when relevant.
- Industry-sponsored speaker’s bureaus are strongly discouraged, as they are defined by federal regulations as part of industry marketing activities.
- Faculty must remain in control of content presented and ensure it is based on the best scientific evidence available.

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## Polk named chair of Dept. of Pediatrics

D. Brent Polk has been named chair of the Department of Pediatrics at the Keck School of Medicine, and chair of pediatrics and vice president of academic affairs at Childrens Hospital Los Angeles, effective April 1, 2010.

A distinguished researcher and clinician, Polk will serve as professor of pediatrics and biochemistry and molecular biology at the Keck School.

As chair of pediatrics, he will be responsible for the department’s educational, research and service missions, and he will oversee faculty working at affiliate hospitals Childrens Hospital Los Angeles and the Los Angeles County+USC Medical Center.

He will also serve as vice dean for clinical affairs (Childrens Hospital Los Angeles).

“Dr. Polk is nationally and internationally recognized for his innovative research and comprehensive, caring treatment of pediatric patients,” said Keck School Dean Carmen A. Puliafito. “His achievements have placed him on lists of America’s Top 100 Pediatricians and Best Doctors in America in Pediatric Gastroenterology for the past five years. Dr. Polk’s leadership will enhance the partnerships between the Keck School and both Childrens Hospital Los Angeles and LAC+USC hospital. He is a gift to the young patients who will

benefit from his care and expertise.”

Richard D. Cordova, president and CEO of Childrens Hospital Los Angeles, joined Puliafito in expressing enthusiasm for Polk’s

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D. Brent Polk



# Fetters awarded Division of Physical Therapy’s first endowed chair

**By Sara Villagran and Beth Dunham**  
A \$1 million gift has established the first endowed faculty chair within the USC Division of Biokinesiology and Physical Therapy.

Linda Fetters, professor and director of the division’s Developmental Motor Performance Laboratory, has been named the inaugural holder of the Sykes Family Chair in Pediatric Physical Therapy, Health, and Development.

Tracy Sykes, a graduate of the USC Doctor of Physical Therapy Class of 1998, and husband Gene T. Sykes, a managing director with Goldman Sachs and Co., established the chair with a \$1 million gift, along with a \$250,000 matching pledge.

The division will seek additional funding sources to bring the total endowment to a \$1.5 million.

“We are extremely grateful for the Sykes’ generosity and vision,” said James Gordon, associate dean and chair of the division. “This gift will help us further establish our program as a national leader in pediatric physical therapy education, clinical practice, service and research.”

After graduating from the Doctor of Physical Therapy program, Tracy Sykes worked in outpatient physical therapy in Santa Monica while continuing to support the division and its research

goals. She has been a member of the Division’s Board of Councilors since 2004 and has lent her support to many initiatives, including the Bice Clinical Research Center campaign.

Sykes also supports research and education in physical therapy that benefits children, even allowing her own children to take part in classroom activities within the division and help students master pediatric strength evaluation and development assessment.

Fetters was selected to fill the chair based on her extensive record in pediatric physical therapy, including experience in clinical practice, research, teaching and administration. Her research is focused on improving the quality of life for infants and children with movement difficulties due to neurological insults. She has developed very early physical therapy treatments using an innovative computerized mobile paradigm for infants at risk for developing cerebral palsy.

“The establishment of the Sykes Family Chair in Pediatric Physical Therapy, Health, and Development supports a vision that focuses on enhancing the health and well-being of children through education of leaders in pediatric physical therapy and rehabilitation,



Linda Fetters

Phil Channing

advancement of cutting edge pediatric research, and outreach to communities neighboring the University of Southern California,” Fetters said.

Fetters teaches courses in development, pediatric physical therapy, and evidence-based physical therapy practice. In addition, she has developed physical therapy distance education and taught evidence-based physical therapy practice within a distance education format.

“Dr. Fetters’ combined expertise will support the continuing vision of pediatric physical therapy at USC and the translation of this vision to excellence in education, practice, research and service,” Gordon said.

**Fetters’ research is focused on improving the quality of life for infants and children with movement difficulties due to neurological insults.**

# POLICY: Guidelines intended to minimize potential conflicts of interest

Continued from page 1

- Gifts and free meals from industry may not be accepted. Food delivered by or paid for by industry marketing representatives is defined as a gift, and may not be accepted.

- Pharmaceutical samples may no longer be distributed through individual clinics. Instead, all samples must be delivered to campus pharmacies for distribution to patients.

“Universities across the country have been called on to review their policies with regard to industry, and at USC, we felt it was important to ensure our practices were free from even the appearance of a conflict of interest,” said Puliafito. “We want to

support a culture of ethics, while supporting meaningful interactions with industry.”

The updated policy applies to any university employee who has direct or indirect influence over prescribing, dispensing or purchasing products made by pharmaceutical or biotechnology companies, medical/dental equipment and device manufacturers, and other health care suppliers.

This would include doctors, dentists, pharmacists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, nurses, clinic staff, hospital staff, residents, fellows and students. New language also emphasizes that the policy is applicable whether on or off campus.

“Collaboration with members of industry has produced remarkable opportunities for the dental field in general and the USC School of Dentistry in particular,” said Sadan. “However, current and future patients deserve treatment backed by solid, unbiased evidence, and we will continue to hold stringent standards about the roles that industry partners have in regards to clinical, research and community activities.”

According to Tammy Capretta, assistant vice president for health care compliance for USC, the policy was created with the assistance of university staff and faculty leadership.

“I have to thank the USC

Health Care Compliance Committee and the Academic Senate for their input in shaping the policy,” said Capretta. “I look forward to working with faculty and staff to help them understand how to implement these policy updates.”

Faculty and staff with questions about the policy can contact the Office of Compliance

at (213) 740-8258. The office is currently working with the various departments to educate affected employees.

“While we are grateful for and enthusiastic about our collaborations with industry, we are also careful to maintain a healthy distance, keeping undue influence far from our work,” said Vanderveen.

## World AIDS Day fair slated for Dec. 1

**By Joe Peters**

Organizers of the Dec. 1 World AIDS Day Health Fair at the LAC+USC Medical Center have a simple message for the public: Get tested.

Stella Quan, organizer of the fair and senior health educator at the Rand Schrader Health and Research Center, said, “Here in L.A. County, we have approximately 54,000 people living with HIV and/or AIDS. In addition, approximately 20 percent of people living with HIV are not even aware that they have this disease. Therefore there is definitely a need for education and to bring people in for testing.”

The fair, which will include information booths, health screenings and rapid HIV testing, will be from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the Courtyard Breezeway of the LAC+USC Medical Center, 2051 Marengo Way, Los Angeles.

For more information, contact Stella Quan at 323-343-8258.

## MASSRY: Recipients often go on to win Nobel

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forever, so I need to set a system [through which] it will continue to work correctly. It’s another thing the school can be proud of.”

Nine previous recipients of the Massry Prize have gone on to win the Nobel Prize, and Massry is confident that Ambros and Ruvkun will

follow in their footsteps. The duo also presented lectures at UCLA, and they were honored with an elaborate ceremony at the Council Chamber of the City of Beverly Hills on Nov. 14. Chaired by Laurence H. Kedes, the Massry Prize committee consists of Martin Pera, Harvey R. Herschman and Joel D. Kopple.

The Weekly

Next Issue: Dec. 4

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# Oncologists re-examine best biopsy practices

By Ryan Ball

A push for less-invasive testing for breast cancer took center stage as leading breast disease specialists met for the recent International Consensus Conference on Image Detected Breast Cancer III.

Organized every four years by Mel Silverstein, medical director of Hoag Breast Care Center and clinical professor of surgery at the Keck School of Medicine, the conference in Newport Beach, Calif., was sponsored by USC and

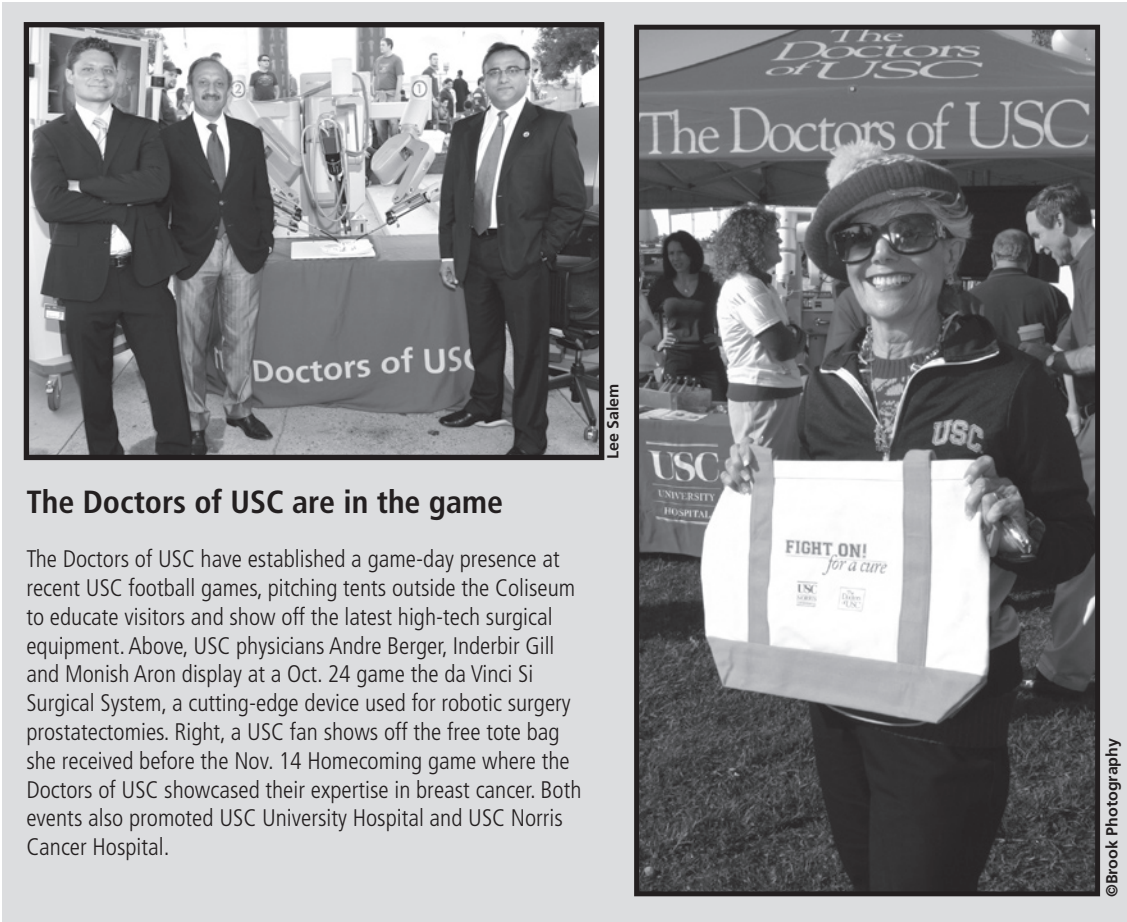
supported by an educational grant from Ethicon Endo-Surgery Inc. Among the participants was Debu Tripathy, an oncologist at the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center. Tripathy reported, “One of

the main conclusions of the panel is that there are too many excisional biopsies done to diagnose breast cancer when core needle biopsies are just as accurate but much less invasive.”

Tripathy noted that he and colleagues in the field have issued a plea urging patients in need of biopsies to be seen at experienced centers where proper imaging and biopsy techniques are available.

While roughly half of breast cancers can now be detected via mammogram and other imaging technologies, signs are often small and require further diagnostic steps such as biopsy. A report published in the October issue of the *Journal of the American College of Surgeons* states that 35 percent of such biopsies performed in the United States still involve unnecessary open surgical techniques.

Tripathy and Silverstein are scheduled to participate in the American Society of Breast Diseases Meeting on April 16, 2010, in New York. More information on that forum can be found at [www.asbd.org](http://www.asbd.org).



## The Doctors of USC are in the game

The Doctors of USC have established a game-day presence at recent USC football games, pitching tents outside the Coliseum to educate visitors and show off the latest high-tech surgical equipment. Above, USC physicians Andre Berger, Inderbir Gill and Monish Aron display at a Oct. 24 game the da Vinci Si Surgical System, a cutting-edge device used for robotic surgery prostatectomies. Right, a USC fan shows off the free tote bag she received before the Nov. 14 Homecoming game where the Doctors of USC showcased their expertise in breast cancer. Both events also promoted USC University Hospital and USC Norris Cancer Hospital.

# POLK: New chair of Pediatrics praised as ‘visionary, thoughtful’ leader

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recruitment. “We’re elated with the appointment of Dr. Polk to this pivotal position, and it comes at an important point in the history of Childrens Hospital Los Angeles. During the challenging days and months ahead, Dr. Polk will be called upon to help us open the doors to our new hospital building, lead our research agenda and forge new and stronger relationships with the community and other health care providers, while strengthening our already close partnership with USC.”

Polk succeeds Roberta G. Williams, who served as professor and chair of the Department of Pediatrics at the Keck School of Medicine and vice president of the Department of Pediatrics and Academic Affairs at Childrens Hospital Los Angeles since 2000.

“I couldn’t be more excited about the opportunity to come to Los Angeles to work with the leadership of USC, the Keck School of Medicine and Childrens Hospital Los Angeles,” said Polk. “I see this as a chance to strengthen the ties between these historic institutions. I also look forward to assisting with the opening of the new Childrens Hospital in 2011. This unprecedented, state-of-the-art facility will provide comprehensive and cutting-edge services to children in the greatest need of medical care. The faculty and staff in pediatrics, the Saban Research Institute, the Keck School of Medicine and USC will be an integrated team in developing preventative, diagnostic, prognostic and therapeutic approaches to a wide variety of childhood disorders, and I believe we can lead the country in this effort.”

Polk comes to USC from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn.,

where he is chief of the D. Brent Polk Division of Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition, director of the Digestive Disease Research Center and a tenured professor of pediatrics and cell and developmental biology.

The division recently named for Polk provides care, diagnostic evaluations, research and testing, as well as management and treatment for infants, children and young adults suffering from nutritional, gastrointestinal or liver disorders. He also served as both interim chair of pediatrics and interim medical director at Monroe Carell Jr. Childrens Hospital at Vanderbilt.

“Brent is one of our premier physicians and has served Vanderbilt with distinction for nearly two decades,” said Jeffrey R. Balser, vice chancellor for health affairs and dean of the School of Medicine at Vanderbilt University Medical Center. “Under Brent’s leadership, his division has experienced significant growth in terms of faculty, programs and grant awards from the NIH. His talents will be missed, but we are proud he will be occupying this important leadership role with USC and Childrens Hospital Los Angeles.”

As a renowned researcher on pediatric inflammatory bowel disease and immune regulation of the gastrointestinal tract, Polk’s research interests focus on regulation of growth and development of the intestinal cell as related to ontogeny (the development of organisms) and disease. He is currently investigating epidermal growth factor and tumor necrosis factor receptor family member signaling mechanisms leading to proliferation, differentiation or migration of intestinal cells and the relationship between inflammation and how tumors grow.

Polk’s accomplishments have established him as a respected leader in pediatrics and research.

“During my years as chair of Pediatrics at Vanderbilt, I encouraged and observed the maturation of Dr. Polk into a thoughtful and visionary leader,” said Arnold Strauss, Rachford Professor and chair of Pediatrics at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine. “His ability to recruit outstanding faculty and successfully mentor them has been exemplary. His research accomplishments have been exciting, well-funded, and directly applicable to human disease. He will be an incredible leader for USC and Childrens Hospital Los Angeles and for academic pediatrics nationally.”

Steven Gabbe, chief executive officer of The Ohio State University Medical Center and a former dean of the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, describes Polk as someone who “simply does everything incredibly well. He’s a nationally and internationally recognized investigator, a skilled clinician, and an effective educator. He has helped hundreds of children who have suffered from painful intestinal conditions and I’m always impressed with his ability to guide families through the complex and stressful process of diagnosis and treatment. It was a privilege to work with him at Vanderbilt.”

Polk’s achievements include being named a Presidential Scholar at Ouachita University (Arkadelphia, Ark.), winning the Turner Scholar Award at Vanderbilt University, and winning the 2009 Grant W. Liddle Award, which recognizes faculty who demonstrate exemplary leadership in the promotion of scientific research at

Vanderbilt. Polk was honored with the Distinguished Alumnus award from the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in September 2009.

Polk is active in several professional organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Gastroenterological Society, the American Pediatric Society, the American Physiological Society and the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology.

He was recently elected to chair the American Gastroenterological Association (AGA) Institute Council. He also is chair of the National Institutes of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases Committee, and serves on the Scientific Advisory Board for the University of San Francisco’s Digestive Diseases Center.

He was the United States organizer and scientific advisor for the World Congress of Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition in Brazil in 2008.

He has served as an ad hoc journal reviewer for nearly 40 medical journals, including the *American Journal of Pathology*, *Cancer Research*, *European Journal of Immunology*, *Gastroenterology*, *Journal of Pediatrics*, and *Nature*.

Polk earned his bachelor’s degree in biology and chemistry, graduating magna cum laude from Ouachita University in 1980, and his medical degree from the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in 1984. He completed his internship and residency in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, and served on a fellowship in pediatric gastroenterology and nutrition at Stanford University School of Medicine.



# Calendar of Events

This Calendar of events is also online at [www.usc.edu/hscalendar](http://www.usc.edu/hscalendar) for the Health Sciences Campus community

## Monday, Nov. 23

**Noon.** KSOM Research Seminar. “Cancer Stem Cells and Microenvironment in Prostate Cancer Progression,” Pradip Roy-Burman, USC. NRT Aresty Aud. Info: (323) 442-7874

## Tuesday, Nov. 24

**9 a.m.** Neurology Grand Rounds. “Stroke,” Askiel Bruno, Medical College of Georgia. ZNI 112. Info: (323) 442-7686

## Wednesday, Nov. 25

**Noon.** “Uric Acid and Renal Disease,” Dalila Corry, UCLA. GNH 4420. Info: (323) 226-7307

## Monday, Nov. 30

**Noon.** KSOM Research Seminar. “Stem Cells and the Liver Microcirculation,” Laurie DeLeve, USC. NRT Aresty Aud. Info: (323) 442-7874

**Noon.** “Coronary Physiology for the Invasive Cardiologist,” Morton Kern, UCI. IPT C2J104-A. Info: (323) 442-7419

## Tuesday, Dec. 1

**11 a.m.** 2009 World AIDS Day Health Fair. LAC+USC Breezeway. Info: (323) 343-8258

**11:30 a.m.** Psychiatry Grand Rounds. “Psychodynamic Psychotherapy: Theory, Studies and Its Use in Treating Patients with Panic Disorder,” Marcia Goin, USC. ZNI 112. Info: (323) 442-4065

## Wednesday, Dec. 2

**Noon.** “The Soul of Medicine: A Conversation with Dr. Erin Quinn,” MCH 249. Info: (323) 442-2552.

**Noon.** “Vascular Access,” Vincent Rowe, USC. GNH 4420. Info: (323) 226-7307

## Thursday, Dec. 3

**Noon.** “Idiosyncratic Drug-induced Liver Injury – The Inflammatory Stress Hypothesis,” Robert Roth, Michigan State Univ. HMR 100. Info: (323) 442-1283

## Friday, Dec. 4

**9 a.m.** Southern California Research Center for ALPD and Cirrhosis and UCSD Diabetes and Endocrinology Research Center Joint Symposium. “Mechanisms of Liver Metabolism and Fatty Liver,” Various speakers. MCH 149. Info: (323) 442-3121

**Noon.** Pharmacology and Pharmaceutical Sciences Seminar. “The Many Functions of APE1 as a DNA Repair and Redox Signaling Target for Cancer Therapeutics and Other Indications,” Mark Kelly, Indiana Univ. Simon Cancer Ctr. PSC 104. Info: (323) 442-2341

## Saturday, Dec. 5

**8 a.m.** KSOM Continuing Medical Education Seminar. “Breast Cancer Update: State of the Art for the Primary Physician,” Various speakers. NRT Aresty Conference Ctr. Info: (323) 442-2555

## Tuesday, Dec. 8

**8 a.m.** Pathology and Laboratory Medicine Grand Rounds. “Inflammatory Skin Diseases for the General Surgical Pathologist,” Mark Wick, Univ. of Virginia Health System. NOR 7409. Info: (323) 442-1180

**10:30 a.m.** University Hospital Guild Holiday Luncheon. “Overlapping Drugs,” Kathy Besinque, USC. UNH Inpatient Café. Info: (323) 254-0600

**Noon.** Cancer Center Grand Rounds. “MiRNAs: Their Developing Role in Prostate Cancer,” Ralph De Vere White, USC. NRT Aresty Aud. Info: (323) 865-0801

**Notice:** Deadline for calendar submission is 4 p.m. Monday to be considered for that week’s issue—although three weeks’ advance notice of events is recommended. Please note that timely submission does not guarantee an item will be printed. Send calendar items to *The Weekly*, KAM 400 or fax to (323) 442-2832, or e-mail to [eblaauw@usc.edu](mailto:eblaauw@usc.edu). Entries must include day, date, time, title of talk, first and last name of speaker, affiliation of speaker, location, and a phone number for information.



Pete Delgado, LAC+USC Medical Center CEO, praises the hard work and dedication of the physicians and staff members of the year-old LAC+USC Replacement Facility at a Nov. 7 celebration.

# LAC+USC fetes new facility’s anniversary

By Leslie Ridgeway

“For all the work you have done, I express my appreciation,” said Pete Delgado, LAC+USC Medical Center CEO, addressing a group of about 50 physicians and employees celebrating the one-year anniversary of the opening of the new LAC+USC facility.

On Nov. 7, 2008, patients were moved from the more than 100-year-old County Hospital and Women’s and Children’s Hospital to the new 600-bed facility, which officially opened for business on Nov. 8. More than two years of intensive planning preceded the move, which was facilitated by hospital staff, Emergency Medical Services, Navy and Air Force personnel, as well as as more than 1,000 volunteers from local county facilities, Delgado said.

To underscore the growth of the new LAC+USC, Supervisor Gloria Molina introduced Arianna Estrella Villaverde, a one-year-old girl who was the first baby born at the hospital.

“I’m very proud of LAC+USC,” said Supervisor Molina. “After many years of planning and construction, we now have the very best, cutting-edge facility available to the public.” Molina noted that the hospital is too small

and overcrowded, but stressed that she was not critical of hospital staff and physicians. “We will overcome that because we have a dedicated group of people here,” she said.

Philip Lumb, president of the medical staff, praised the partnerships that have sustained the hospital, as well as the “unique interaction of learning and community” that exists at LAC+USC.

Lumb quoted the Eastern philosopher Lao Tzu, who noted, “We hammer wood for a house, but it is the inner space that makes it livable ... We work with being, but non-being is what we use.”

Lumb continued: “The magic of LAC+USC is the ‘non-being’ that brings these remarkable individuals together to create a powerhouse of health care.”

Supervisor Molina then cut one of four cakes made for the event, which were decorated with photos of LAC+USC.

John Shunhoff, interim director of the County of Los Angeles Department of Health Services, also spoke at the event. The Bravo High School Band provided entertainment.

## Professional clothing sought for clothing drive to benefit job seekers

The Southeast L.A.-Crenshaw Work Source Center, USC Employee Recruitment Services and USC Civic and Community Relations have launched a clothing drive to help local residents prepare for job interviews and give them confidence as they settle into new jobs. The drive, which runs through Dec. 18, seeks donations of clean, gently used items of professional clothing such as suits, shirts, blouses and skirts. Job seekers also need slacks, belts, ties, purses and other accessories that are suitable for the work environment. Clothing can be dropped off on Thursdays and Fridays during the drive period at KAM 420. For more information, call (323) 442-3572.

## In case of an emergency...

**Call the Emergency Information Phone: 213-740-9233** The emergency telephone system can handle 1,400 simultaneous calls. It also has a backup system on the East Coast.

**Visit the USC Web: <http://emergency.usc.edu>** This page will be activated in case of an emergency. Backup Web servers on the East Coast will function if the USC servers are incapacitated.

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