

## Keck Medicine of USC hospitals ranked among nation's best



By Meg Aldrich

For the eighth 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 cancer and urology.

Keck Medical Center of USC, which consists of Keck Hospital of USC and USC Norris Cancer Hospital, maintained its Top 3 ranking on the list of Best Hospitals in metro Los Angeles (No. 3). The medical center also increased its rankings among the Best Hospitals in California (No. 8), moving up one spot from last year. The medical center has been highly

ranked since having been purchased by the university in 2009.

"Keck Medicine of USC is honored to be ranked among the country's best hospitals and clinical programs for the eighth year running," said Tom E. Jackiewicz, MPH, senior vice president and CEO of Keck Medicine of USC. "Our faculty physicians, nurses and staff work tirelessly to ensure that we provide exceptional medicine to our patients and I am delighted to see their efforts recognized on a national scale."

The medical center also performed well in a number of specialty rankings, securing a Top 50 placement in seven specialties. The USC Roski Eye Institute remained the institution's top-performing service line for the 23rd consecutive year (No. 11). The USC Institute of Urology had the largest increase since

2015 out of the hospital's specialties and received its highest-ever ranking (No. 15). The USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center also moved up considerably for its highest ranking ever (No. 18). Keck Medical Center also increased its ranking in geriatrics (No. 21), and is newly ranked in orthopaedics (No. 22), nephrology (No. 37) and cardiology (No. 48). Four additional service lines were ranked as High Performing: gastroenterology & GI surgery; neurology & neurosurgery; pulmonology; diabetes & endocrinology.

"As a university-based medical center, we are proud

See **RANKINGS**, page 3

## In memoriam: Harlyne Norris, 83, USC trustee

By Lynn Lipinski

USC Life Trustee Harlyne Norris, whose family foundation made possible USC's influential research and treatment efforts to fight cancer, died July 30 in her beloved South Bay. She was 83.

A civic-minded volunteer and philanthropist, Norris devoted herself to her family and causes in science, medicine and the arts. She and her late husband, Kenneth T. Norris Jr., were generous benefactors to USC, continuing a tradition of giving begun by his parents, Eileen and Kenneth T. Norris Sr. Through the Kenneth T. and Eileen L. Norris Foundation, the Norris family was instrumental to creating the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center and USC



Harlyne Norris

Norris Cancer Hospital, one of the premier cancer centers in the nation. Harlyne Norris dedicated millions of dollars from the foundation, and her time as a USC trustee, toward advancing science and care that

See **NORRIS**, page 3

## Pharmacy school taps Papadopoulos as dean

By Emily Gersema

Vassilios Papadopoulos, PharmD, PhD, executive director and chief scientific officer of the Research Institute of McGill University Health Centre in Montreal, has been named dean of the USC School of Pharmacy, effective Oct. 1.

Papadopoulos, who also has been the associate executive director of research for the McGill University Health Centre, will hold the John Stauffer Dean's Chair in Pharmaceutical Sciences at USC.

USC Provost Michael Quick, PhD, announced the appointment Aug. 2 on behalf of USC President C. L. Max Nikias, PhD.

"Vassilios Papadopoulos is a transformative leader and I am



Vassilios Papadopoulos

thrilled that the USC School of Pharmacy will be helmed by someone of his broad experience and expertise," Nikias said. "Over the years, the USC School of Pharmacy has estab-

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## \$2.5 million award to fund student scholarships



High school student Jose Salazar works with Primary Care Physician Assistant student Curtis Ciesinski to learn how to suture in a workshop at a recent USC PA Pipeline event.

By Claire Norman

The Primary Care Physician Assistant Program at the Keck School of Medicine of USC has been awarded more than \$2.5 million to support scholarships for disadvantaged students, one of only three physician assistant (PA) programs nationally to receive this award.

The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, awarded the program \$2.596 million to help fund the tuition of 101 disadvantaged students over the next four years.

"We are excited to be able to offer funds to disadvantaged students that will lower their student debt levels," Program

Director Kevin Lohenry, PA-C, PhD, said. "We hope to help break down some of the barriers for disadvantaged students who seek to enter the PA profession through the Keck School of Medicine of USC."

The funds will be distributed over the next four years based on financial aid calculations focused on financial need. Scholarships will be awarded to students in amounts from \$24,000 to \$26,000 toward their costs for attending the graduate program.

Titled "Four Rs for USCPA Scholarship for Disadvantaged Students," the goals of the grant focus on four aspects to help disadvantaged health care profes-

See **SCHOLARSHIPS**, page 2



# Innovator Showcase seeks student startups

By Peijean Tsai

USC students with a startup idea or invention could earn recognition and funding through the USC Stevens Student Innovator Showcase business competition. The USC Stevens Center for Innovation is currently seeking applications from students to compete in the 10th annual USC Stevens Student Innovator Showcase. Applications for the Showcase are being accepted online at <http://stevens.usc.edu/events/student-innovator-showcase> until Sept. 2.

The Student Innovator Showcase is USC Stevens’ annual flagship event where USC students in all disciplines present their startup ideas to faculty and leaders from the entrepreneur and business community, competing for thousands of dollars in USC-sponsored prizes. It will be held from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Oct. 7 on the Allan Hancock Foundation Building lawn and feature keynote speaker Mark Stevens, a USC trustee, donor, alumnus and one of Silicon Valley’s top venture capitalists.



Douglas Morino

**WELCOME HOME:** Currie Hall, the newly-constructed student residence hall on the Health Sciences Campus, welcomed students on Saturday, July 30, 2016. The hall is made of 178 residential units with 456 beds and features a fitness center, swimming pool, barbecues and an “academic success center” with computers, printers and two study rooms. Currie Hall also will feature nine units specifically for Keck Medical Center of USC patients and family members who are staying on campus for more than a week. The complex features 24-hour, on-call staff, card-controlled access, bike storage, garage parking and fully furnished apartments. — **Douglas Morino**

## PHARMACY: School known for ‘intense focus on excellence’

Continued from page 1

lished itself as a national leader through its pioneering research, its work with at-risk communities and by leading the evolution of the pharmacist’s role from service provider to patient care steward. With today’s appointment, I have every confidence that the school will continue on its impressive trajectory.”

Papadopoulos has published more than 300 papers, holds numerous patents and serves on many national and international advisory committees. He is an elected foreign member of the National Academies of Medicine and Pharmacy in France, fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and fellow of the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences.

“I am excited to join the Trojan Family,” the incoming dean said. “USC is a highly ranked education and research institution that rises in stature every year. The USC School of Pharmacy has been leading the field of pharmacy for more than 100 years and it is known for its intense focus on excellence. The faculty and students are among the best in California.”

For nearly a decade, Papadopolous has led initiatives at McGill University Health Centre’s research

arm, including “Translation-al Research and Intervention across the Lifespan,” which resulted in more than \$300 million in federal and provincial grants to build a state-of-the-art facility for clinical and biomedical research, said McGill University Health Centre officials.

“We found Dr. Papadopoulos to be highly qualified to lead the School of Pharmacy as it continues to advance its already-outstanding legacy of scholarship and influence,” Quick said.

A School of Pharmacy graduate of the University of Athens, Greece, Papadopoulos holds a PhD in health and life science from the Université Pierre et Marie Curie in Paris, and he worked as a post-doctoral researcher in France and Australia.

Papadopoulos and his wife Martine Culty, a tenured associate professor in the departments of Medicine and Pharmacology and Therapeutics at McGill University, soon will move to Los Angeles. Culty, whose research focuses on reproductive biology, toxicology and endocrine disruptors, will become an associate professor in the Department of Pharmacology and Pharmaceutical Sciences at USC School of Pharmacy.

## SCHOLARSHIPS: Goals of grant include recruiting, lowering debt

Continued from page 1

sional students and underserved communities. First is “recruit,” which seeks to increase the number of disadvantaged students entering the program and profession. Second is “retain,” which is intended to help students stay in the program by supporting their educational efforts during their time in school. Third is “reduce,” aimed to lower student debt overall and last is “return” focused on encouraging these scholarship recipients to practice medicine in medically underserved communities.

The receipt of this scholarship fund from HRSA follows in the trail of the PA program’s success in their outreach, interprofessional and diversity programs such as the USC PA Pipeline, which once a month brings in students from local underserved communities to teach them about careers in health care.

The program also received an award for diversity from the Physician Assistant Education Association last year and continues to teach numerous National Health Service Corps scholars.

## Award honors compassionate care

By Douglas Morino

A veteran Keck Medical Center of USC staff member has been selected as this year’s recipient of a prestigious award honoring an unwavering commitment to compassion and personalized health care.

Diane Lapa, director of patient relations in the Patient and Family Experience Office of Keck Medical Center of USC, received in June the The Etz Chaim — Tree of Life Award, which honors physicians, nurses and staff who demonstrate extraordinarily compassionate patient care.

Rod Hanners, CEO of Keck Medical Center of USC and COO, Keck Medicine of USC, said Lapa strives to improve the health and lives of patients through compassionate care

that demonstrates integrity, excellence, respect and empathy.

“As we all know, Diane possess all of these characteristics and much more,” Hanners said. “She is an ideal candidate for this award.”

The Etz Chaim — Tree of Life Award of Compassionate Care was established in 2014 by Etan Chaim Milgrom, MD, a clinical professor of family medicine and pediatrics. The award is presented annually to a Keck Medicine faculty or staff member who models and provides compassionate care, serves as a mentor and fosters a culture that celebrates learning and development of a community of compassionate health care providers.

Lapa, who has worked for USC for 23 years, said she was

grateful for the opportunity to work alongside her colleagues at Keck Medical Center while helping patients and their loved ones.

“My journey has been inspired by the colleagues I work with everyday,” Lapa said. “There are so many others deserving of this award. And I am so grateful that I get to go home each day and say “I made a difference.”

Lapa embodies the spirit of the Tree of Life Award and exemplifies compassionate patient care, Milgrom said.

“Diane is such a worthy recipient,” Milgrom said during the Tree of Life Award ceremony. “She is a mentor to her colleagues, promotes altruism and fosters compassion in the workplace.”

## Calendar of Events

### Friday, Aug. 12

**8:30 a.m.** Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology Grand Rounds. LAC+USC Medical Center Inpatient Tower Conference Room A.

**11 a.m.** Jane Anne Nohl Division of Hematology and Center for the Study of Blood Diseases Grand Rounds. “New Therapeutic Targets in AML,” Kevin Kelly, MD, PhD. LAC+USC Medical Center Inpatient Tower Conference Room A. Info: Carolyn Castellanos, (323) 865-3913, [castellanos\\_c@med.usc.edu](mailto:castellanos_c@med.usc.edu)

**5 p.m.** Office of Student Affairs. “White Coat Ceremony and Faculty Teaching Awards.” Eli and Edythe Broad Lawn. Info: Teresa Cook, (323) 442-2419, [teresa.cook@usc.edu](mailto:teresa.cook@usc.edu)

### Monday, Aug. 15

**10 a.m.-1 p.m.** Keck Medical Center of USC. “Wellness Fair.” Eli and Edythe Broad Lawn. Health screenings, chair massage, pet therapy, etc. Keck faculty or

staff ID required for entry.

**8-10 p.m.** Keck Medical Center of USC. “Wellness Fair.” Hoffman Cafe, Keck Hospital. Health screenings, chair massage, pet therapy, etc. Keck faculty or staff ID required for entry.

### Wednesday, Aug. 17

**4 p.m.** USC Women in Management Workshop. “Wealth Wednesday: Women and Wealth,” Jessica and Russell Kobrin. Norris Medical Library West Conference Room. Info and RSVP: Ginger Mayerson, (323) 384-6049, <http://www.uscwim.org/calendar.asp>. WIM members free; \$10 for non-members

### Wednesday-Friday, Aug. 17-19

**All day.** Keck School of Medicine of USC division of pain medicine, Department of Anesthesiology, division of nursing education and the USC Office of Continuing Medical Education. “7th Annual

Pain Management Symposium: From Evidence to Clinical Practice,” Keynote Speakers: Scott M. Fishman, MD, Linda Watkins, PhD, and Steven Richeimer, MD. Hilton Los Angeles/Universal City. Info: Teresa Ball, (323) 442-2555, <https://cmetracker.net/KECKUSC/Catalog>

### Friday, Aug. 19

**8:30 a.m.** Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology Grand Rounds. “Practice Improvement: What’s Trending,” Yoko Takashima, MD, and Brian Gordon, MD. LAC+USC Medical Center Inpatient Tower Conference Room A.

### Tuesday, Aug. 23

**Noon.** Department of Psychiatry Grand Rounds. “Understanding the Military Culture for Improving the Care of Veterans and Military Families,” Carl A. Castro, PhD. Herklotz Seminar Room, ZNI 112.

**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](http://hscnews.usc.edu/calendar-of-events). Submit items at [tinyurl.com/calendar-hsc](http://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.



# New team to improve customer service

By Douglas Morino

A new initiative to strengthen Keck Medicine of USC's pledge to provide exceptional customer service has been launched.

A new customer service division for patient financial services will be based at the Health Sciences Campus, bringing crucial services that were once performed 3,000 miles away back to Los Angeles.

Previously, customer service had been outsourced to a call center in New Jersey. A total of 12 Keck Medicine customer service representatives and management employees have been hired and trained. The new Keck Medicine customer service employees began their role Aug. 1.

"Our goal is to partner with our patients and help them navigate the billing and payment process," said Randy Ray, associate administrator of revenue cycle services.

Having a customer service division at Keck Medicine solely dedicated to billing inquiries will allow representatives to have ample time with patients on the phone.

"Patients will see more complete, compassionate customer care," Ray said. "We have instilled in our new staff the importance of providing patients with uncompromising customer service."

Representatives also will be in a better position to help identify patients with financial needs and aid them to most generous financial assistance program provided by Keck Medicine, Ray added. Last year, Keck Medicine provided \$57 million in financial assistance to patients.

While the primary goal of the customer service initiative is to provide patients with accurate information regarding their billing inquiries, the long-term goal is to broaden the scope of customer service to include all of Keck Medicine.

"This will allow us to provide an exceptional, personal experience for each of our patients far into the future," Ray said.

# In Memoriam: Peter V. Lee, 93

By Claire Norman

Professor Emeritus Peter V. Lee, MD, former chair of the Department of Family Medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, died July 26. He was 93.

Peter Van Arsdale Lee was born in San Francisco in 1923, and like his father, four brothers and one sister, pursued a career as a physician. He graduated from Stanford University School of Medicine followed by residencies in pathology and medicine at Stanford and NYC Health + Hospitals/Kings County in Brooklyn, New York, and — after completing his residency — returned to teach at Stanford as an assistant professor of pharmacology.

In 1955, Dean Gordon E. Goodhart, MD, recruited Lee to USC as an assistant professor of pharmacology, with an additional appointment as an assistant dean. He was one of the creators of the Introduction to Clinical Medicine (ICM) program in 1969 and oversaw the creation of the new Department of Family Medicine in 1983 as its inaugural chair after its separation from the Department of Family and Preventive Medicine. He was instrumental in the establishment of the USC Family Medicine Residency at California Hospital in 1984 and set up the Family Medicine Clerkship rotation for medical students in their third year.

Lee received awards for his excellent teaching, leadership and care throughout his career, including having the 1966 USC Medical School yearbook dedicated to him, being recognized as "Outstanding Clinical Science Instructor" by the 1976 graduating class, receiving the Elaine Stevely Hoffman Service Award in 1994, and appointment as the Lorin Stephens Memorial Lecturer at USC in 1995.

"Dr. Lee exemplified what a physician should be," said Laura Mosqueda, MD, the current chair of the Department of Family Medicine. "The reason our department is



Peter V. Lee



Peter V. Lee, center, was one of the creators of the Introduction to Clinical Medicine program in 1969 and was the inaugural chair of the Department of Family Medicine in 1983.

Photos courtesy of the Lee family

so focused on the nexus of medical care and social justice traces directly back to Dr. Lee's influence and his commitment to the underserved."

Pamela Schaff, MD, associate dean for curriculum, started teaching ICM in 1986 and remembers Lee as one of her heroes.

"I think Peter's generosity of spirit is what made him such an incredible mentor and human being," she said. "I hope we will honor his legacy by striving to teach, practice, lead and serve as magnificently as he did."

Lee is survived by his wife, Belinda Fischer, four children — Martha, Susan, Catherine and Peter — two grandchildren and one great-grandson.

A memorial will be held at 2:30 p.m. Oct. 3 in Aresty Auditorium on the Health Sciences Campus. In lieu of flowers, the Lee Family has requested gifts to be directed to the Peter V. Lee, M.D. Fund for Family Medicine. For more information, go to <http://keck.usc.edu/family-medicine/support-us/peter-v-lee>.

## RANKINGS: Recognition reflects daily commitment of all staff

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these rankings reflect the daily commitment our faculty physicians make to world-class patient care complemented by the innovative research of our physician-scientists that keeps our patients at the center of the latest treatments and therapies," said Rohit Varma, MD, MPH, interim dean of the Keck School of Medicine of USC who also is president of USC Care, the medical enterprise's faculty physician group. "Being recognized in these rankings is an honor that continues to

motivate us to do what is in the best interest of our patients."

For 2016-17, *U.S. News* evaluated hospitals in 16 adult specialties and ranked the top 50 in most of the specialties. Three percent of the nearly 5,000 hospitals that were analyzed for Best Hospitals 2016-17 were nationally ranked in even one specialty. Objective measures such as patient survival and safety data, adequacy of nurse staffing and other data largely determined the rankings in most specialties. A few other specialty

rankings, including Ophthalmology, are weighted more heavily on reputation data.

The specialty rankings and data were produced for *U.S. News* by RTI International based in Research Triangle Park, N.C. *U.S. News* used the same data to produce the state and metro rankings.

The rankings are available at <http://health.usnews.com/best-hospitals> and will appear in the *U.S. News Best Hospitals 2017* guidebook, available on newsstands Aug. 30.

## NORRIS: Benefactor dedicated millions toward advancing science, benefitting patient care

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benefit patients across the world.

"Harlyne's generosity and compassion, demonstrated through gifts that promoted health and education, will continue to benefit USC and the community for decades to come," said USC President C. L. Max Nikias, PhD. "She will be remembered for her longtime leadership as a trustee and friend to the university, advancing its mission of education and research while honoring the legacies of her husband and family. The Trojan Family will miss her greatly."

A Southern California native, Harlyne Norris grew up in Santa Monica and attended UCLA to become a teacher. She married soon after college and was a full-time parent to her three children.

After losing her first husband, she met Kenneth Norris Jr. They married in 1973 and became partners in both life and philanthropy. She joined the family foundation as a trustee in 1981, and took over as its chair in 1997, following Kenneth Norris Jr.'s death. Her three children and his son from his first marriage also sit on the foundation's board.

The Norris family has supported many educational causes at USC through the Kenneth T. and Eileen L. Norris Foundation. The USC Norris Medical Library, the USC Eileen L.



Harlyne Norris with USC President C. L. Max Nikias at the Norris Healthcare Consultation Center groundbreaking in 2013.

Steve Cohn

Norris Cinema Theatre and the USC Norris Dental Center all bear the family name in recognition of the Norris family's generosity over the years.

Kenneth Norris Jr., a USC alumnus, was the namesake and primary benefactor of the USC Norris cancer center, one of the nation's first National Institutes of Health-designated comprehensive cancer centers. His initial

personal gift, along with a contribution from the foundation, made possible the cancer center and hospital, which, when it opened in 1983, was the first medical center in Southern California exclusively devoted to cancer. He also was instrumental in funding the Dr. Norman Topping Tower at the cancer center. In addition, the foundation named two endowed chairs in his honor, one in cancer

prevention and one in medicine.

Harlyne Norris joined the USC Board of Trustees in 2000, following in the footsteps of her husband and her father-in-law. Over the decades, the Norris family continued to contribute significantly to the cancer center. The family foundation provided a lead gift for the Harlyne J. Norris Cancer Research Tower, the cancer center's third building. At a groundbreaking ceremony for the 10-story tower in 2003, she said that her greatest hope was that work accomplished in the tower "makes Ken's dream of an end to cancer come true." Its opening in 2007 dramatically increased laboratory research space for the Keck School of Medicine of USC. An additional gift in 2012 from the foundation supported construction on the USC Health Sciences Campus of the Norris Healthcare Consultation Center, a new outpatient clinic building. She also served on the advisory board of the USC Norris cancer center.

She was awarded an honorary degree by USC in 2008 in recognition of her service, generosity and guidance to the university and other organizations that support children, health care, medical research, education and the arts.

She is survived by her children Lisa Hansen, James Martin and Kimberley Presley.



## HSC Newsmakers

A roundup of news items related to Keck Medicine of USC, which may include philanthropic donations, research grants, publication in academic journals and mentions in the news media:



Courtesy Brandee Georgievitch

The nurses of 7 West are the first unit at Keck Hospital of USC to be awarded the Beacon of Excellence award.

## Nurses, physicians earn two recognition awards

NURSES AND PHYSICIANS AT KECK HOSPITAL and USC Norris Cancer Hospital were recognized recently with two awards. The 7 West Surgical ICU earned the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses' Beacon Award for Excellence, which signals a positive and supportive work environment with greater collaboration between colleagues and leaders, higher morale and lower turnover. The Get With the Guidelines-Resuscitation (GWTG-R) Silver Award was presented to USC Norris Cancer Hospital's clinical nurses, critical care nurse practitioners and critical care doctors for their timely response, hard work, knowledge and accurate documentation when a Code Blue is called. — **Douglas Morino**



Ricardo Carrasco III

From left, Richard H. Zeiss, John H. Reith, Zea Borok, Rohit Varma, Michael Gurevitch, Anne Hormann, Gene E. Gregg and Thomas Buchanan.

## Hastings Foundation board of directors meet on campus

THE HASTING FOUNDATION'S BOARD OF DIRECTORS met on the Health Sciences Campus recently, joined by Rohit Varma, MD, MPH, interim dean of the Keck School of Medicine of USC and director of the USC Gayle and Edward Roski Eye Institute; Thomas Buchanan, MD, vice dean for research at the Keck School; and Zea Borok, MD, chief of the division of pulmonary, critical care and sleep medicine at the Keck School and inaugural director of the newly established Hastings Center for Pulmonary Research. The Hastings Foundation is a longstanding supporter of pulmonary research at the Keck School, donating more than \$33 million since 1975, including a recent \$7.5 million gift to launch the Hastings Center for Pulmonary Research.

— **Melissa Masatani**

## Research funding programs available for investigators

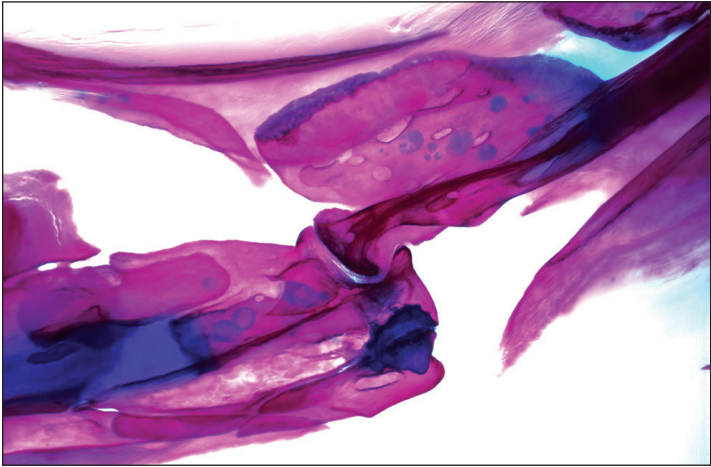
IN A MEMO SENT TO KECK SCHOOL OF MEDICINE of USC faculty and staff on Aug. 3, Interim Dean Rohit Varma, MD, MPH, announced two funding programs that support the investigation of new research areas. The Pilot Funding Program targets junior and established investigators interested in launching or transitioning to a new area of research. Priority will be given to projects obtaining feasibility data that will lead to submission of new NIH R-series or other major research proposals. Letters of intent are due to the Office of the Dean by Aug. 15 and proposals are due by Sept. 2. The Bridge Funding Program supports principal investigators conducting research that will lead to the securing of new grant awards. The purpose of the program is to provide funds to productive principal investigators who have lost their extramural funding, but remain potentially competitive. Awards are for a period of one year and are renewable with progress and justification. For more information about these funding opportunities, visit <http://keck.usc.edu/research-alerts>. — **Sara Reeve**

# Arthritis originated in primordial fish

By **Cristy Lytal**

Researchers from the USC Stem Cell laboratory of Gage Crump, PhD, have found that zebrafish and two other ray-finned fishes could develop early onset arthritis in their jaws and fins because of similarities with mammalian synovial, or lubricated, joints, according to a new study published in *eLife*.

This means zebrafish, known for its regenerative abilities, can be used to study ways to reverse arthritis in patients by watching how it naturally repairs its damaged joints.



Image/Amjad Askary

Adult zebrafish jaw joint.

For more about this study, go to [hscnews.usc.edu](http://hscnews.usc.edu)

# USC Norris and Hoag begin joint Phase I clinical trial program

By **Amanda Busick**

An ongoing alliance between the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center and Hoag Family Cancer Institute at Hoag Memorial Hospital Presbyterian in Newport Beach has expanded to include a joint Phase I/early therapeutics clinical trial program. The program recently activated its first joint clinical trial, one of many planned in a relationship that will benefit both institutions and cancer patients throughout Southern California.

Rohit Varma, MD, MPH, interim dean of the Keck School of Medicine of USC and director of the USC Roski Eye Institute, said, "We are pleased to be able to enter into this phase of our alliance with Hoag as it will be beneficial to all aspects of clinical care and research for USC Norris, the Keck School and Keck Medicine as a whole."

Anthony El-Khoueiry, MD, director of the Phase I Program and medical director of the Clinical Investigations Support Office at USC Norris, is enthusiastic about what the commencement of this program will mean for everyone involved.

"If these trials are only available at academic medical centers like ours, where patients have to drive for 40, 50, 60 miles," he explains, "many patients do not have the opportunity to participate for logistical and sometimes financial reasons. The idea is to bring these opportunities to the Orange County community."

The spectrum of early phase trials that are planned to open at USC Norris and Hoag under this alliance will offer a broad range of innovative and cutting-edge therapies to patients, including new drugs that stimulate the immune system for immunotherapy trials; drugs that target cancer stem cells; and others that act to reprogram genes in the tumor, known as epigenetic therapy.

Burton Eisenberg, MD, professor of clinical surgery at the Keck School, executive medical director of Hoag Family Cancer Institute and Grace E. Hoag Executive Medical Director Endowed Chair, and Diana Hanna, MD, assistant professor of medicine at the Keck School, provide oversight for the Phase I clinical trials at Hoag as part of the collaboration.

Stephen Gruber, MD, PhD, MPH, director of the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center noted, "This is another great step for our patients in Orange County and our clinical trial program. Dr. El-Khoueiry and Dr. Eisenberg have done a great service through this alliance to enhance our terrific collaboration and to bring innovation to the community."

El-Khoueiry noted that this also greatly benefits the researchers at USC Norris, as it broadens the number of available qualified participants in the study.

"In the era of precision medicine, the nature of Phase I trials has changed," El-Khoueiry said. "In the case of Phase I trials evaluating targeted agents against specific genetic alterations in the tumor, we have to screen a large number of patients to find the ones who qualify and would hopefully derive the most benefit."

This first study is a follow-up to an initial Phase I trial that studied the compound

sEphB4-HSA as a single drug therapy. Parkash Gill, MD, professor of medicine and Renette and Marshall Ezralow Family Chair in Cancer Therapeutics, developed the compound. The trial will study the effects of three different chemotherapy combinations containing sEph4B4-HSA on patients with pancreatic, biliary, non-small cell lung and head and neck cancers.

El-Khoueiry concluded by saying that this is a unique alliance that would not have happened without the support of the leadership at both USC and Hoag.

"There is a true commitment on both sides to bring the best that an academic comprehensive cancer center has to offer and merge it with the high caliber clinical care that a distinguished community hospital provides," he explained. "Ultimately, the synergy between our institutions will contribute to the mission of the USC Norris to make cancer a disease of the past."

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