

COMMUNITY

for a CURE



Message from the Director



I hope your summer is off to a good start. As we move toward a new academic year, I wanted to share some thoughts about leadership diversity and development in oncology. At the national level, I serve as the elected President of the Association of American Cancer Institutes (AACI). As part of my presidency, we have launched a national effort to create a diverse pool of emerging cancer center leaders and a leadership development initiative to prepare them to succeed.

A diverse and well-prepared leadership workforce in the nation's cancer centers is vital to tackle national challenges in the delivery of equitable cancer care delivery. Recognizing this, I worked with AACI and colleagues at other cancer centers to conduct a national survey of gender, ethnic, and racial diversity among current and emerging leaders.

We present the results of this survey in a new publication in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*. In this paper, entitled "Leadership Diversity and Development in the Nation's Cancer Centers", our results show that only 7 percent of cancer center directors identified as Hispanic, 2 percent as Black, 10 percent as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1 percent as other or more than one race. Women leaders were also underrepresented at about 16 percent of cancer center directors. Emerging cancer center leaders, those in mid-level cancer center leadership positions, were only marginally more diverse than current leaders.

To achieve the nation's goal to 'end cancer as we know it,' cancer centers must prioritize leadership diversity and development. At Norris, we will lead the way in offering leadership development workshops for our exceptional clinicians and scientists and in developing a tool-kit that cancer centers across the nation can deploy. I look forward to sharing our progress with you in the future!

Caryn Lerman

Caryn Lerman, PhD
Director, USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center
Associate Dean for Cancer Programs
H. Leslie and Elaine S. Hoffman Cancer Research Chair
Provost Distinguished Professor



Honors and Appointments



Dr. Anthony El-Khoueiry has been appointed as the Associate Director for Clinical Research at the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center (USC Norris), effective May 1, 2022. In this role, Dr. El-Khoueiry will oversee the clinical research infrastructure and resources at USC Norris and will work closely with the Norris leadership team to develop and implement strategies for the continued growth of clinical research and clinical trials at the Cancer Center.



Dr. Chanita Hughes-Halbert, Associate Director for Cancer Equity at USC Norris, has been appointed to the Stand Up To Cancer Health Equity Committee which aims to improve disparities in cancer research, screening, and treatment. Learn more about the committee here: <http://ow.ly/rjSw50ITYoA>.



Dr. John Carpten, Associate Director for Basic Research at USC Norris, was awarded the 2022 Healing Award by the Tower Cancer Research Foundation at its 20th Annual Tower of Hope Gala on May 12. This award recognizes individuals whose work, passion, and drive move and advance cancer research towards better diagnostics and treatments for patients with cancer.



Dr. Adam Leventhal, a member of the USC Norris Cancer Control Research Program, has been awarded the American Psychological Foundation Gold Medal Award for Impact in Psychology. This award recognizes psychologists whose research has had a game-changing impact. Dr. Leventhal received the award for his transformative research on tobacco product use.



Dr. Ahmad Besaratinia, member of the USC Norris Cancer Epidemiology Program, has been appointed to the California Carcinogen Identification Committee. The California Carcinogen Identification Committee includes expert scientists appointed by the Governor to assess suspected cancer-causing chemicals of concern.



Dr. Mariana Stern, Associate Director for Population Science at USC Norris, was a lead contributor to the 2nd American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) Cancer Disparities Report and delivered remarks regarding the importance of cancer prevention and survivorship research to congress. The goal of the report is to increase public understanding of cancer health disparities and of the importance of research on disparities to save lives. Read the full report here: <https://cancerprogressreport.aacr.org/disparities/>.



Dr. Preet Chaudhary, member of the USC Norris Tumor Microenvironment Program, received a \$5.8 million award from the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine to use synthetic immune receptors that may be able to overcome limitations of current cellular immunotherapies for solid tumors. Read more about this study here: <https://tinyurl.com/mtxtjf42>.



Congratulations to Dr. Adam de Smith, member of the USC Norris Cancer Epidemiology Program, who was awarded a major grant from the National Cancer Institute to conduct a comprehensive study of the role of inherited genetic variation in the increased risk of childhood acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL) in Hispanics/Latinos. Led by a team of investigators at USC Norris, this will be the largest genetic study of childhood ALL to date, combining existing and new genetic data from collaborators across the U.S.

Scientific Advances



Study reveals a lack of concordance in symptomatic adverse event reporting by children, clinicians, and caregivers

To improve the detection of symptom side effects in children treated in cancer clinical trials, Dr. David Freyer, member of the USC Norris Cancer Control Research Program, examined the concordance between the symptom reports from children with cancer and those reported by their providers and parents. He and his team discovered that children's symptoms and treatment side effects were consistently under-reported by providers and often over-reported by parents/guardians. This work highlights the critical importance of improving side effect assessments to reduce the burden of childhood cancer. This article appeared in the May issue of the *Journal of Clinical Oncology*.

“ This study showed that neither oncology providers nor parents/guardians are particularly accurate when it comes to detecting symptomatic adverse events that children experience while receiving cancer treatment. If you want to know what the child is feeling, it makes sense to start by asking the child.”

- David Freyer, DO, MS



Results of randomized controlled trial demonstrate sun protection changes among diverse elementary schoolchildren

Excessive sun exposure in childhood increases the risk of melanoma in adulthood. To improve children's sun safety behaviors, USC Norris member Dr. Kimberly Miller conducted a school-based skin cancer prevention intervention targeting more than 3,000 diverse elementary schoolchildren in Los Angeles County. Published in the journal *Preventive Medicine*, Dr. Miller found that children who received the sun safety intervention exhibited more sun protective behaviors at the three-month follow-up compared to children who did not. Read the full publication here: <https://tinyurl.com/4j3veac5>.

“ We found that this brief intervention not only improved sun protection behaviors in children, but also that children continued to maintain them into summertime when ultraviolet radiation (UVR) is highest. Improving children's sun protection is critical for public health, particularly in regions like Southern California which has some of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world.”

-Kimberly Miller, PhD

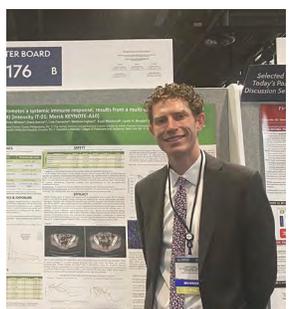


New study reveals structural analysis of the basal state of the Artemis: DNA-PKcs complex

Published in the journal *Nucleic Acids Research*, Dr. Michael Lieber, member of the USC Norris Translational and Clinical Sciences Program, and his colleagues discovered the atomic structure of the Artemis:DNA-PKcs complex using cryo-electron microscopy. Increased knowledge of the atomic structure will allow the development of drugs that inhibit this enzyme complex in tumor cells to cause the tumor cells to develop chromosome breaks, eventually permitting a therapy with minimal side effects. Read the full publication here: <https://academic.oup.com/nar/advance-article/doi/10.1093/nar/gkac564/6633899>.

“ The atomic structure will allow development of drugs that inhibit this enzyme complex in tumor cells to cause the tumor cells to develop chromosome breaks. This strategy is particularly useful for tumors where chromosome breaks are readily targeted, as in the most common types of lymphoid malignancies in children.”

- Michael Lieber, MD, PhD



Clinical trial reveals potential new cancer therapy is feasible and well tolerated amongst patients with metastatic disease

At the 2022 American Society of Clinical Oncology annual meeting, Dr. Jacob Thomas, a medical oncologist at USC Norris, presented results from a Phase II clinical trial assessing a cancer therapy called INT230-6 injected directly into cancer tumors. INT230-6 is a new product with a unique dual anti-cancer mechanism. The results show a positive effect not only on the injected tumor, but also other tumors within the body that were not injected. Learn more here: <https://meetings.asco.org/abstracts-presentations/207587>.

“ Intravenous chemotherapy has anticancer activity, but also travels throughout the body leading to various side effects which limit the dose that can be given. In this Phase II clinical trial of INT230-6, we have successfully administered high doses of chemotherapy directly into cancer tumors. This treatment has manageable side effects and we have seen promising signs of anticancer activity.”

-Jacob Thomas, MD

Faculty Spotlight



Gabriel Zada, MD, member of the USC Norris Genomic and Epigenomic Regulation Program, director of the USC Brain Tumor Center

Dr. Gabriel Zada is a neurosurgeon and an internationally recognized expert in brain, skull base, and pituitary tumor surgery, as well as a variety of endoscopic and minimally invasive neurosurgical techniques.

He has treated over 2,000 patients with brain and skull base tumors using both minimally invasive and open cranial approaches. He also co-directs the USC Radiosurgery Center and performs both Gamma Knife and TrueBeam radiosurgery. Dr. Zada is an NIH-funded principal investigator whose research laboratory focuses on the genomics and epigenetics of brain and pituitary tumors.

“The number one thing that drives my work is the desire to help others and to help them through the difficult and challenging times in their lives,” said Dr. Zada. **“Moreover, I am also driven by the desire to discover the nature of these diseases and how we can impact them. Only by understanding these diseases as scientists and clinicians can we create new and less invasive treatments.”**



As director of the USC Brain Tumor Center (BTC) at USC Norris and Keck Medicine, Dr. Zada directs a comprehensive minimally invasive cranial surgery program including endoscopic skull base/pituitary surgery, exoscopic minimally invasive parafascicular surgery (MIPS), and intraventricular neuro-endoscopy. The BTC is paving the way towards longer-term control and cures for a variety of brain tumors via streamlined, multidisciplinary clinical care, access to the latest clinical trials, and cutting-edge translational research. Early phase multi-institutional and investigator-initiated clinical

trials developed by the BTC scientists and physicians are prioritized at USC Norris. New initiatives on the horizon span from novel drug therapies, immunotherapy, drug delivery mechanisms such as intranasal therapy, and cutting-edge surgical treatments.

“It takes a team to make this happen,” said Dr. Zada. **“Our team is very passionate about taking care of our patients and their families. Only through these highly collaborative means can we continue to work towards our goal of finding a cure for brain cancer.”**

32nd Festival of Life at USC Norris



USC Norris celebrates the strength of cancer survivors at 32nd Annual Festival of Life. The spirited sounds of the USC Trojan Marching Band reverberating through Pappas Quad at the Health Sciences Campus kicked off the 32nd Festival of Life - the first such event in-person since the COVID-19 pandemic. Hosted by USC Norris on June 4, this event celebrated the strength, resilience, and tenacity of

cancer survivors. The morning was filled with uplifting words of survivorship, inspirational speeches from cancer survivors, and a breathtaking dove release.

“Never lose hope,” said Ms. Debbie Sierra-Wilhelm, an acute myeloid leukemia cancer survivor. **“Don’t let your thoughts consume you. Stay focused. There are people out there that genuinely want to help you. The doctors, nurses, and support staff at USC Norris are here for us. They are and will continue to be my guiding light. I can’t begin to thank everyone at USC Norris for being there during my darkest hours.”**

Judy Stark, a 21-year cancer survivor and volunteer at USC Norris, led the tradition of inviting cancer survivors to stand amid applause during the Festival of Life in a show of celebration and support. Those who have survived cancer for up to 20 years or more, as well as those who are just starting their cancer survivorship, were honored and received a roaring round of applause by all in attendance.



The event concluded with the release of the doves, a tradition of this annual celebration. Doves are symbols of hope. In releasing the doves that day, we not only celebrated cancer survivors and patients who battle their cancer every day, but also remembered those we’ve lost along the way.

“Hope is not a cliché,” said Dr. Grossman, Physician in Chief at USC Norris. **“Hope is possibly the most potent weapon we hold in our cancer treatment arsenal.”**

The 33rd annual USC Norris Festival of Life will take place on **Saturday, June 3, 2023.**

The Patient Voice



Tiffany Lin began feeling aches and pain throughout her body during her sophomore year in college. She thought the pain she was feeling was due to kidney stones and made an appointment with her doctor to get it checked out. She was given a pelvic exam and it revealed a mass near her ovaries. At this point, she was referred by her primary care physician to the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center and was given the news that no one is ever prepared to hear: **“You have cancer.”** In 2013, Tiffany was diagnosed with stage I non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.

“I was in shock,” said Tiffany. **“I originally thought I had kidney stones, so a cancer diagnosis was not something I was prepared for. When I got the diagnosis, it took a while for the reality to sink in, I didn’t know how to react. I even went to class later that afternoon and my class lecture happened to be on cancer. It was at this moment the reality of my diagnosis hit me and I just broke down during my lecture.”**

Tiffany’s treatment was not easy. She had to take time off school to focus on her treatment. She struggled with this as she felt that she was falling behind compared to her other classmates. At one point during her treatment, Tiffany got extremely sick and wasn’t sure how much longer she had to live. It was at this point that she promised herself that if she made it through and beat this cancer, she would come back to the USC campus as either a pharmacy or medical student and do great things.

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“Set a goal, something you want to do after you get into remission,” said Tiffanie. “Having a goal was helpful for me. There were a lot of times I wanted to give up during chemotherapy and during treatment because it does get difficult but having a goal in mind for something you want to do after helped me not give up and keep fighting.”

There were a multitude of things that helped Tiffanie get through her cancer diagnosis and treatment. She has a strong support system of family and friends who made her feel like she wasn't alone in her battle. Her mother was present every step of the way, accompanying Tiffanie to every appointment, treatment, and chemotherapy session. She also joined the USC Norris Adolescent and Young Adult (AYA) Program that put her into contact with another young adult that went through a similar diagnosis. This individual gave her hope and guidance for the future. The USC Norris AYA Program, established in 2013, aims to improve health outcomes and quality of life of adolescents and young adults with cancer through supportive care and research that address the medical, physical, psychosocial, spiritual, financial, and legal aspects for these patients.

Thanks to her oncologist **Dr. Ann Mohrbacher** and the entire team at USC Norris, Tiffanie has now been cancer free for nine years and has accomplished the goal she made for herself when she had cancer. Tiffanie graduated with the class of 2022 from the USC School of Pharmacy as class president and was chosen as this year's commencement speaker. She is now a first-year resident at Sharp Medical Center in Chula Vista.



“I am so grateful that I was referred to USC Norris and treated there,” said Tiffanie. “The doctors, nurses and staff at USC Norris were wonderful. They made me feel like I could fight and beat this cancer and get through my diagnosis. After being a patient and seeing firsthand how important it is to have healthcare professionals in our lives, it inspired me to pursue a career in healthcare as well. I want to give back in the way USC Norris helped me. Also, I never really understood what a critical role pharmacists had in the hospital setting until I became one myself. So I just wanted to say a special thank you to all the pharmacists who worked behind the scenes to make sure my chemotherapy regimens were safe for me to take; you guys rock!”

Fight On Tiffanie! You are going to continue to do great things!

Why Your Gift Matters



Dana and David Dornsife are international philanthropists committed to using their time, talent, and resources to address a wide range of societal problems. They are devoted and generous supporters of academic institutions and research, environmentalism, and sustainability. The Dornsifes have a long philanthropic history with the University of Southern California (USC), their name being very well known throughout the campus.

Dana is an entrepreneur, advocate, and philanthropist in the areas of health care, education, the environment, and social justice. She first became involved in cancer patient advocacy in 2003 when her brother-in-law, Mike Miller, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and she was looking into his clinical trial options. She was struck by how difficult it was to navigate through the options available, identifying a critical gap in cancer care.

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To address this gap, Dana founded the Lazarex Cancer Foundation in 2006. The Lazarex Cancer Foundation strives to improve cancer health equity by fostering enrollment of underrepresented patients in oncology clinical trials with patient navigation and financial support. The Lazarex Foundation is now in its 17th year of operation.



“It is such a tremendous opportunity to provide someone the gift of prevention or the gift of life through a cancer clinical trial where they might not have had that opportunity without you,” said Dana.

The Dornsifes and the Lazarex Cancer Foundation first became connected with USC Norris with the creation of the Lazarex IMPACT Program at USC Norris. This program increased enrollment, retention, minority participation, and equitable access to cancer-focused clinical trials by removing financial barriers for participation, improving access, and providing patients with educational materials regarding these clinical trials. Moreover, the Dornsife’s personally fund a clinical trial patient navigator at USC Norris who helps community members navigate through their options and the resources available to them.

“I appreciate the fact that USC Norris is a very civically engaged institution and has tremendous community presence,” said Dana. **“This presence provides a natural gateway to bring these programs and resources to the residents of these communities, address cancer health disparities, and improve cancer health outcomes.”**



Recently, the Lazarex Cancer Foundation provided a \$200,000 grant to USC Norris to establish Cancer Wellness HUBs in the greater Los Angeles area. The Cancer Wellness HUBs are situated within the diverse communities they serve. USC Norris staff are enhancing community engagement and providing a local resource for cancer-related education and navigation support for cancer services, ranging from prevention to survivorship. Dr. Lourdes Baezconde-Garbanati, Associate Director for Community Outreach and Engagement at USC Norris, leads this program in collaboration with Dr. Marya Shegog, Health Equity and Diversity

Director at the Lazarex Cancer Foundation. Cancer Wellness HUBs will transform how USC Norris engages its community to reduce the burden of cancer for patients and their families.

“What we hope to accomplish is to create a platform of equitable access and show that we can positively influence cancer clinical trial diversity and enrollment,” said Dana. **“We want every cancer patient to have the opportunity to take advantage of any clinical trial regardless of their social economic standing, race/ethnicity, or zip code.”**

Staff Member of the Month



Melba Ragasa, Administrative Assistant to Christopher Loertscher, Chief Administrative Officer. Ms. Ragasa has worked for the Cancer Center since 2014. As the Administrative Assistant to the Chief Administration Officer, she supports Mr. Christopher Loertscher and ensures that all areas of administrative support with regards to his endeavors are managed successfully. When asked what she loves most about her job, she said her colleagues. A few words that describe Ms. Ragasa are kind, helpful, and hard working.

With your help, we can make cancer a disease of the **past.**

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Have something to contribute to Community for a Cure? Send it to Hinde.Kast@med.usc.edu

To learn more about giving to USC Norris, please contact Minhaal M. Nathani, Executive Director of Development, at Minhaal.Nathani@med.usc.edu

Learn more about the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center on our website:
<https://uscnorriscancer.usc.edu>