COMMUNITY for a CURE

Message from the Director

I am delighted to share with you the latest issue of the USC Norris Newsletter. This issue highlights stories about our exceptional clinicians, scientists, staff, and philanthropic partners. In addition, it also features an inspiring USC Norris patient story. At USC Norris, we are proud to be a magnet for the best minds in cancer research, cancer education, and delivery of patient-centered care.

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

We are proud to share that USC Norris has once again been ranked among the Top 20 Cancer Hospitals by U.S News and World Report and is now elevated in 2022-2023 to #18 in the nation. Thank you to our phenomenal physicians, nurses, and staff who provide exceptional care to our patients and to our scientists who discover novel approaches to cancer treatment and prevention.
Congratulations to Dr. Lourdes Baezconde-Garbanati, USC Norris Associate Director for Community Outreach and Engagement, who has been selected as the recipient of the Hands of Hope Award from the Lazarex Cancer Foundation. The Hands of Hope Award was presented to honor her work increasing access to clinical trials in underserved communities in Los Angeles County.

Congratulations to Dr. Hossein Jadvar, member of the USC Norris Translational and Clinical Sciences Program, who was appointed Vice Chair of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) Advisory Committee on Medical Uses of Isotopes (ACMUI). The committee advises the NRC on policy and technical issues that arise in the regulation of the medical uses of radioactive material in diagnosis and therapy.

We are pleased to share that the Vassiliadis Family Foundation has provided a generous gift to endow the new position of Chief Innovation Officer at USC Norris, currently held by Dr. Vasiliki Anest. Dr. Anest works with USC Norris members to foster innovation and build strategic public-private partnerships to advance our mission.

Congratulations to Drs. John Monterosso and Alayna Tackett, members of the USC Norris Cancer Control Research Program, who were awarded a major grant by the National Cancer Institute to examine how nicotine and sweet flavoring in electronic cigarettes affect brain function and appetite. This study will inform public health interventions to reduce the use of electronic cigarettes, especially among youth.

Dr. Jorge Nieva, a member of the USC Norris Translational and Clinical Sciences Program and a medical oncologist specializing in lung and head and neck cancer, was featured in a roundtable discussion at the 2022 American Society of Clinical Oncology annual meeting about the unmet needs of cancer patients, including strategies to manage brain metastases in non-small cell lung cancer patients. See the full interview here: https://tinyurl.com/2p8ejvet. For a link to the whole roundtable series, go here: https://tinyurl.com/4rhyktur.
USC Norris members reveal that hydra-elastin-like polypeptides increase rapamycin potency when targeting cell surface GRP78

Published in *Biomacromolecules*, Drs. Amy Lee and Andrew MacKay revealed that the potency and selectivity of a drug commonly used for the treatment of breast cancer can be enhanced considerably by engineering the drug carrier to recognize a protein GRP78 expressed on the cell surface of these cancer cells but not in normal cells. To read the full publication, go here: [https://pubs.acs.org/doi/full/10.1021/acs.biomac.2c00048](https://pubs.acs.org/doi/full/10.1021/acs.biomac.2c00048).

"Rapalogues are powerful therapeutic modalities for breast cancer; however, they suffer from low solubility and dose-limiting side effects. To overcome these challenges, we developed a long-circulating, multiheaded drug carrier called 5FA, which contains rapamycin-binding domains linked with elastin-like polypeptides. Taking advantage of the discovery that the chaperone protein GRP78 is preferentially expressed on the cell surface of cancer cells, this study demonstrates how peptide ligands for GRP78 may be incorporated into protein-based drug carriers to enhance targeting and drug potency."

- Amy Lee, PhD

Dr. Vinay Duddalwar, member of the USC Norris Translational and Clinical Sciences Program, revealed that CT-based radiomics signatures may prove to be useful tools to assess grade and stage of clear cell renal cell carcinoma

Published in *European Radiology*, Dr. Duddalwar and his colleagues discovered multiphase CT-based radiomics signatures have the potential to serve as a non-invasive method to access the grade and stage of clear cell renal cell carcinoma, a type of kidney cancer. This new method could potentially add to current prognostic models. To read the full publication, go here: [https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00330-021-08344-4](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00330-021-08344-4).

"Our emphasis is to extract information from clinical imaging to supplement more invasive prognostic models in different tumors with the potential to impact treatment decision pathways."

- Vinay Duddalwar, MD, FRCR

Dr. Jesse Berry, member of the USC Norris Genomic and Epigenomic Regulation Program, utilizes novel approach to characterize retinoblastoma (tumors of the eye) in children

Published in *Nature Communications*, Dr. Jesse Berry and her colleagues demonstrated that a novel liquid biopsy approach using a very small volume of ocular fluid, called the aqueous humor, can be used to predict response to therapy and eye salvage for children with retinoblastoma. To read the full publication, go here: [https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-022-33248-2](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-022-33248-2).

"Once you can identify the good tumors that are likely to respond to therapy and the bad tumors that are likely to be more aggressive and respond poorly to therapy, you can offer treatments that are most likely to be effective."

- Jesse Berry, MD
Cancer Network sits down with Dr. Heinz-Josef Lenz, Deputy Director for Research Programs at USC Norris, to discuss two novel genes that appear to be promising targets in advanced colorectal cancer

Dr. Heinz-Josef Lenz discusses two novel genes that may open new precision treatment possibilities in metastatic colorectal cancer in an interview with the Cancer Network. To read the full interview, click here: https://www.cancernetwork.com/view/two-novel-genes-may-open-new-precision-treatment-possibilities-in-metastatic-colorectal-cancer.

“These two studies demonstrate that gene expression levels provide insights into potential therapeutic targets, helping us find patients who benefit more from certain targeted agents than others.”

-Heinz-Josef Lenz, MD

Dr. Steve Kay, co-director of the Rosalie and Harold Rae Brown Center for Cancer Drug Development at USC Norris and member of the USC Norris Genomic and Epigenomic Regulation Program, reveals new insights into a deadly brain tumor

Glioblastoma is the most common cancerous brain tumor in adults. Published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Dr. Steve Kay and his colleagues showed that a new class of small molecule drugs targeting circadian clock proteins play a key role in the recurrence and spread of this deadly cancer. Read the full publication here: https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2203936119.

“This is a potent molecule that’s very exciting in terms of its potential for glioblastoma treatment. With support from the Rosalie and Harold Rae Brown Center for Cancer Drug Development at USC Norris, we hope to transform this discovery into a new therapy. This work shows that when you bring together the right kind of collaboration, academic researchers can be leaders in the discovery of cancer drugs.”

- Steve Kay, PhD

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


“The HOXB13 (X285K) mutation is only found in men of West African ancestry and is associated with 2.4-fold increase in risk of prostate cancer, with mutation carriers being a greater risk of disease progression. Understanding who carries this mutation may help to inform screening for early detection and the ability to treat the disease before it progresses”

-Christopher Haiman, PhD
**Faculty Spotlight**

Chanita Hughes-Halbert, PhD, USC Norris Associate Director for Cancer Equity

Dr. Chanita Hughes-Halbert is a nationally recognized leader in cancer prevention and minority health research. She has dedicated her career to reducing the disparities in cancer outcomes that affect patients from underrepresented populations, with a primary focus on African American communities. She also serves as the Associate Director for Cancer Equity for USC Norris. In this role, she ensures that our high impact research and personalized patient care benefits all people, including those who have historically not had access to new advances in cancer prevention and treatment. Dr. Hughes-Halbert is also Vice Chair for Research in the Department of Population and Public Health Sciences at USC.

“Reducing disparities and enhancing equity through the design and testing of population-specific interventions is at the forefront of the nation’s agenda on minority health and cancer health disparities,” said Dr. Hughes-Halbert. “For this reason, I have dedicated my academic career and professional service activities to addressing these issues through systematic research.”

Among her many achievements, she has identified sociocultural, psychological, genetic, and environmental determinants of minority health and cancer health disparities and translated this information into interventions to improve health equity among racially and ethnically diverse populations, as well as other medically underserved groups. Dr. Hughes-Halbert is a translational behavioral scientist; her research focuses on three converging lines of investigation using a cells to community approach: 1) enhancing participation of minorities in health promotion and disease prevention research conducted in community and clinical settings; 2) identifying physiological antecedents and consequences of cancer risk behaviors and health promotion strategies to improve the precision of cancer control interventions for minorities and medically underserved populations; and 3) translating evidence about multilevel determinants into sustainable infrastructure for health promotion and disease prevention through community engagement and participatory research methods.

“There are so many important resources at USC Norris that can be leveraged and applied to reduce cancer health disparities,” said Dr. Hughes Halbert. “I want my work to enable people to navigate whatever type of situation they are in, whether it be in their community, in their hospitals, or clinical settings that provide primary care or specialty services. I hope my work provides individuals the tools and resources that will enable them to make the best decisions possible related to their health and healthcare in a way that is easily accessible to all.”

**The Patient Voice**

In September of 2020, the world as Debbie Sierra-Wilhelm knew it changed forever after receiving a diagnosis of acute myeloid leukemia. At the time of her diagnosis, she was told that 60 percent of the cells in her bloodstream were leukemia cells. After being informed she would need a bone marrow transplant to survive, she was referred by her physician to the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center.

“Hearing the diagnosis was like a punch in the stomach,” said Debbie. “It was devastating. The fear that gripped me was unimaginable. I went from hospital to hospital. Finally, I was referred to USC Norris.

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That is when the best part of my journey began because I was at an institution that had the means to treat me. I knew I was in good hands. I was optimistic.”

Once at USC Norris, a bone marrow donor was found. However, the leukemia had other plans. Unfortunately, Debbie experienced many of the negative side effects that are common in leukemia patients such as Sweet Syndrome and Aspergillus that forced her bone marrow transplant to be postponed. At this point, Debbie was beginning to feel defeated by her disease as she needed this transplant to survive, but her team at USC Norris would not let her stop fighting.

“I’m lying in my hospital bed alone with my thoughts, and like a guardian angel, my physician, Dr. Eric Tam, walked into my room to visit me,” said Debbie. “Not as my doctor, but as a friend. He reassured me and helped me maintain hope. His words gave me comfort and a renewed sense of confidence for a better outcome.”

Debbie received a bone marrow transplant in March of this year. Thankfully, due to the care she received from all of the exceptional medical professionals who treated her at USC Norris, Debbie is now a cancer survivor.

This past June, Debbie spoke as a cancer survivor at the 32nd Festival of Life hosted by USC Norris. This event celebrated the strength, resilience, and tenacity of cancer survivors. Her speech filled the morning with uplifting and inspiring words of survivorship, providing other cancer survivors and those still going through their cancer journeys one of the greatest weapons against cancer…hope.

“Never lose hope,” said Debbie. “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.”

Why Your Gift Matters

Anne Lynch has a long legacy with the University of Southern California (USC), a relationship that started when she attended USC as a student. After her collegiate years, as a librarian on the University Park Campus, she participated in the transformation of access to information from card catalogs and print collections to anywhere, anytime internet access to knowledge. During her 40-year career as an Associate University Librarian, she served in many positions, including the Head of the Science and Engineering Library, and the Assistant Dean for Public Services for USC Libraries.

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Anne and her family also have a long legacy of giving to cancer-related organizations and patients. Her parents volunteered for the American Cancer Society, her mother at the Discovery Shop and her father provided rides to chemotherapy and radiation appointments for cancer patients. As a cancer survivor herself, and after witnessing multiple generations of her family deal with cancer and its treatment, she decided to donate to the Norris Cancer Center Fund.

“Fighting cancer and aiding those who are going through a cancer diagnosis is very important to me,” said Anne. “Three generations of my family have had cancer.”

Though supporting cancer research and medical breakthroughs is important to Anne, she is also very passionate about supporting the patient on an individual level and supporting programs that provide patients with resources and support, something she did not feel she had access to during her own cancer journey.

“It is important to me to assist programs that help individuals going through a cancer diagnosis feel that they have a community in which they are supported,” said Anne. “Back in 1978, I was a young adult who had thyroid cancer and there wasn’t support back then. During that time, people didn't talk about cancer and when it was spoken about, it was a death sentence. Everything has changed a great deal, all for the better, and I am proud to be a part of that progress.”

One of the programs she supports aims to create the community she once longed for during her own cancer diagnosis. The USC Norris Adolescent and Young Adult 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.

Debbie continues to donate to USC regularly, supporting Dr. Jorge Nieva’s Lung Cancer Research, as well as the Norris Cancer Research Fund.

“I don't expect that my donation in and of itself will make any big change, but in combination with many other donations, I believe it transforms into a significant resource that will advance cancer research and medical breakthroughs,” said Anne. “Science continues to evolve; we learn more and more every day. I am a retired librarian, so I believe in the importance of good research and getting high quality, fact-based information out to the public in a format that is accessible to the lay reader. I hope my donations help make the outcomes for cancer better and more hopeful.”

Donors like Anne are vital in advancing cancer research forward. Thanks to their support, USC Norris will continue to generate groundbreaking research that will help us conquer the most challenging cancers and help countless patients and their families for years to come.

**Staff Member of the Month**

Carla Martinez, Project Specialist - Research Administration. Ms. Martinez has worked for the Cancer Center for about two and a half years. As a Project Specialist for Research Administration, she administratively manages Cancer Center memberships, pilot funding opportunities, an internal database that tracks all internal pilot funding, and IRB renewals. Additionally, she distributes funding opportunities to Cancer Center Members, is responsible for NIH Biosketch formatting, and confirms that annual disclosures, conflict of interest training, and USC’s intellectual property ACT is completed by USC Norris faculty.

When Ms. Martinez is not at work, she loves to volunteer, read, cook, and spend quality time with her cat, family, and friends.
**Upcoming Events**

**Grand Rounds: Oncogenic Role of RNA-modifying Enzymes**
October 4, 2022, 12-1 pm  
**Speaker:** Richard Gregory, PhD  
**Zoom Link:** [https://usc.zoom.us/j/97857681457](https://usc.zoom.us/j/97857681457)  
For more information, click [HERE](#).

**NCCC MGC Multi-omics Discovery Symposium**
October 6, 2022, 9 am-2:30 pm  
**Description:** Join us for the NCCC MGC Multi-omics Discovery Symposium to learn and collaborate on how multi-omics and single-cell technologies are revolutionizing our ability to understand disease biology and uncover new therapeutic targets.  
**Register:** [https://tinyurl.com/2ep4bua3](https://tinyurl.com/2ep4bua3)

**Grand Rounds: State of the Cancer Center**
October 18, 2022, 12-1 pm  
**Speaker:** Caryn Lerman, PhD  
**Zoom Link:** [https://usc.zoom.us/j/93050790908](https://usc.zoom.us/j/93050790908)  
For more information, click [HERE](#).

**Cancer Center Grand Rounds**
November 1, 2022, 12-1 pm  
**Speaker:** Monica Webb Hooper, PhD  
**Zoom Link:** [https://usc.zoom.us/j/91754883856](https://usc.zoom.us/j/91754883856)  
For more information, click [HERE](#).

**Grand Rounds: Malignant Transformation of the Immune System**
November 15, 2022, 12-1 pm  
**Speaker:** Ari Melnick, MD  
**Zoom Link:** [https://usc.zoom.us/j/95951223030](https://usc.zoom.us/j/95951223030)  
For more information, click [HERE](#).

**8th Annual Swing Against Cancer Golf Tournament**
November 18, 2022  
**Location:** Rancho La Quinta Country Club  
**Description:** Join us on Friday, November 18, 2022, at Rancho La Quinta Country Club to enjoy a day of brunch, golf, hosted cocktails, and dinner. Don't miss out on great prizes, auction items, and speaker testimonials as we continue to support cancer research at USC Norris.  
**Register:** [https://e.givesmart.com/events/rCV/](https://e.givesmart.com/events/rCV/)
With your help, we can make cancer a disease of the past.

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Contact Us

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