

UCI HEALTH IS EXPANDING TO
MEET REGION'S HEALTH NEEDS

LOSING WEIGHT WITH
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UCI Health

FALL 2024

live well

EXCEPTIONAL HEALTHCARE FOR SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Tour de Force

Innovative cancer care restored her zest for life.



REACHING PATIENTS ACROSS THE REGION



In July, UCI Health celebrated the opening of the Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center and Ambulatory Care building at our new UCI Health — Irvine medical campus. It completes the second phase of the \$1.3 billion complex just north of the UC Irvine campus.

It also signals yet another step in the rapid transformation of UCI Health into one of California's largest providers of healthcare services. Earlier this year we acquired four Tenet Healthcare Corporation hospitals and associated outpatient facilities to better serve north and west Orange County communities,

as well as the greater Long Beach area. When our new full-service hospital is completed next year at the Irvine campus, residents of south and coastal Orange County will have convenient access to the full range of inpatient and outpatient care offered by the county's only academic health system.

When we began planning UCI Health — Irvine, we knew it was essential to include a cancer center to complement our flagship Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center in Orange. As a National Cancer Institute-designated comprehensive cancer center, our mission is to provide state-of-the-art cancer care and address the unique cancer concerns of our region. By establishing this second clinical hub in Irvine, we have tripled our space to treat cancer patients and hired over 30 additional specialists. Moreover, it enables us to boost an already robust slate of cancer clinical trials, allowing UCI Health to offer our patients more therapies that go beyond the standard of care.

On page 6 of this issue of *Live Well*, you can read about an avid cyclist who reflects our commitment to innovative, never-give-up cancer treatment. Our world-class faculty of oncologists, surgeons, therapists, nurses, nutritionists and other professionals are the soul of our cancer center. With clinicians who conduct research and push the boundaries of medicine, we routinely see successful outcomes in even the most challenging cases.

We also invite you to learn about a novel way to treat fecal incontinence resulting from childbirth (page 3). And I know you will be inspired, as I was, by the stories of a retired UC Irvine dance professor who underwent a lifesaving heart procedure (page 12) and two sisters who experienced life-altering bariatric surgery together (page 18).

UCI Health is growing and thriving. On page 10, I share my vision for our organization. As we expand access to our services, we will never sacrifice our quality of care and compassion for patients who have made us the heart of healthcare in Orange County.

Sincerely,

Chad T. Lefteris, FACHE
President and Chief Executive Officer
UCI Health

UCI Health

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Information in this magazine is not meant to
replace the advice of your physician.

SUPPORT UCI HEALTH

As Orange County's only academic health system, we are pushing the frontiers of lifesaving research while improving health and wellness in our community and beyond.

We cannot succeed without you. Please consider becoming an active partner in charting our future path. With your support, we will make new medical breakthroughs, redefine patient care, educate the next generation of health professionals and promote physical and mental well-being in our communities.

To make a gift supporting the expansion of UCI Health, to thank a provider or honor a loved one's memory, email supporthealth@uci.edu, call 714-456-7350 or visit ucihealth.org/giving. Your gift also supports the UC Irvine Brilliant Future campaign.

BRILLIANT FUTURE
THE CAMPAIGN FOR UCI Irvine

TESTING A PROMISING STEM-CELL THERAPY FOR FECAL INCONTINENCE

WRITTEN BY LAUREL DIGANGI

A distressing and seldom-discussed complication of vaginal childbirth is fecal incontinence. It can persist long after a woman has otherwise recovered from childbirth and severely impair her lifestyle. However, a new UCI Health colorectal surgeon Dr. Joseph C. Carmichael, principal investigator of the study. "About 30% of women who deliver vaginally can incur an anal sphincter muscle injury caused by an episiotomy or perineal tear."

"The problem is quite prevalent," says UCI Health colorectal surgeon Dr. Joseph C. Carmichael, principal investigator of the study. "About 30% of women who deliver vaginally can incur an anal sphincter muscle injury caused by an episiotomy or perineal tear."

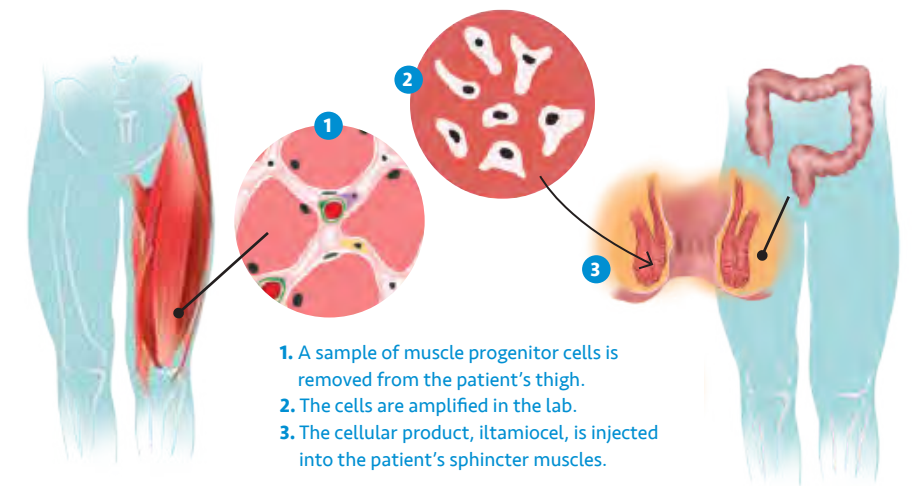
Carmichael, who also is chief medical officer and a senior vice president of UCI Health, says the therapy being tested has the potential to be a life-changing — and minimally invasive — option. "This new approach uses a small sample of a patient's own best muscle progenitor cells biopsied from their thigh, then amplifies and reimplants them."

The UCI Alpha Clinic, the clinical trial arm of the UC Irvine Sue & Bill Gross Stem Cell Research Center, is one of only three locations on the West Coast to offer the potentially groundbreaking therapy.

The phase 3 trial is designed to test the effectiveness of iltamioce, a cellular product developed by Cook Myosite Inc., a leader in regenerative muscle cell research. After collecting and processing the patient's own muscle cells, the final product is injected into the anal sphincter muscle, where it can form new muscle and strengthen existing tissue. The study is open to women ages 18 and older who have experienced chronic fecal incontinence for more than 12 months.

"Typically, they would have had over four episodes within a four-week period and a history of an obstetric injury," Carmichael says of the ideal study

TREATING FECAL INCONTINENCE WITH STEM CELLS



candidates. "They would have tried and not responded to other types of management, such as modifying their diet and pelvic floor training for at least six months before enrollment."

The double-blind clinical trial will enroll 200 women at 19 U.S. locations. Half will be treated with iltamioce, the other half with a placebo, and neither patient nor doctor will know who received the placebo. Patients will be monitored for two years to test the treatment's efficacy.

"One great aspect of this clinical trial is that after the first year, the study will no longer be blind and patients in the placebo group will have access to iltamioce," says Carmichael. He is hopeful the cellular therapy can help renew muscle function, given promising results of an early phase trial with 48 patients.

According to Carmichael, people challenged by fecal incontinence often do not seek treatment. Instead, many develop work-arounds to compensate for their lack of bowel control, such as always carrying a change of clothes and mapping out accessible bathroom locations before leaving home. Some even end up avoiding

social activities altogether.

"We've gotten better with people talking about urinary incontinence," he says, but people need to speak to their healthcare providers about fecal incontinence, too. He wants them to know there is help available now.

Traditional treatment for damaged sphincter muscles has been surgery to tighten them, requiring a hospital stay and weeks of recovery. "Now we have newer treatments that are far less invasive," he says. "One involves implanting a tiny nerve stimulator that dramatically improves both urinary and fecal incontinence."

Carmichael encourages women interested in the iltamioce trial to make an appointment with a UCI Health colorectal surgeon. "It's extremely rewarding to me as a provider when my patients tell me that they are starting to enjoy more time with friends and family because they aren't worried about having to race to a bathroom." ■

Learn more about the iltamioce clinical trial at bit.ly/3zzbbuo



UCI HEALTH ADDS FOUR COMMUNITY HOSPITALS IN MAJOR EXPANSION

UCI Health has acquired four hospitals and associated outpatient locations from Tenet Healthcare Corporation, transforming the health system into one of the largest healthcare providers in the region. The new hospitals are Fountain Valley Regional Hospital, Lakewood Regional Medical Center, Los Alamitos Medical Center and Placentia-Linda Hospital. The hospitals are now part of the UCI Health Community Network.

As Orange County's only academic health system, UCI Health plays a unique and critical role in providing healthcare in the region. The acquisition builds on its commitment to improve community health by expanding unrestricted healthcare access for more people in Southern California.

"The people of Southern California and the patients across

these local communities have something truly remarkable to celebrate," says Chad T. Lefteris, president and CEO of UCI Health. "We have built a legacy as a nationally regarded academic health system that is fiercely dedicated to improving the health of our communities. We are investing in building a healthier future for people that harnesses the power of advanced medicine with the convenience of care available close to home."

The acquisition adds 858 inpatient beds that, when paired with 459 licensed beds at UCI Medical Center in Orange, strengthens the health system's ability to meet the ever increasing demand for inpatient intensive and critical care. Patients of the former Tenet hospitals and outpatient offices can continue receiving care from their trusted physicians and clinical teams as they normally would.

CHAO FAMILY COMPREHENSIVE CANCER CENTER AND AMBULATORY CARE BUILDING OPENS AT UCI HEALTH — IRVINE



The new Irvine center, which began caring for patients on July, 16, offers the full range of advanced cancer diagnostic and therapy services along with outpatient surgical services performed by leading UCI Health specialists.



Dr. Skandan Shanmugan and Dr. John G. Lee

CO-DIRECTORS NAMED TO LEAD DIGESTIVE HEALTH

Dr. John G. Lee and Dr. Skandan Shanmugan have been named to lead the prestigious Chao Digestive Health Institute. As co-directors, they bring extensive experience to a multispecialty team renowned for its innovation, clinical excellence, education and discovery, says Chad T. Lefteris, president and CEO of UCI Health.

"The Chao Digestive Health Institute is one of the few comprehensive centers in the nation to provide state-of-the-art care for patients with all digestive diseases," says Lefteris. "Dr. Lee and Dr. Shanmugan provide the deep experience and expertise that will lead the institute to even greater achievements in advancing care for digestive health."

Lee has served as associate director of the flagship Chao Family Comprehensive Digestive Disease Center in Orange and directs pancreaticobiliary services at UCI Medical Center. He specializes in diagnosing and treating disorders of the pancreas and biliary tract using minimally invasive techniques, including interventional endoscopic ultrasound and endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography.

Shanmugan, who leads colorectal surgery services, specializes in laparoscopic and robot-assisted surgical approaches to treating colorectal diseases, including advanced colon and rectal cancers and complex inflammatory bowel diseases.

UCI MEDICAL CENTER NAMED A TOP U.S. HOSPITAL FOR INPATIENT, OUTPATIENT CARE

UCI Medical Center, part of UCI Health, was recognized as a "top performer" for high-quality inpatient and outpatient care by the prestigious 2024 Vizient Inc. Quality and Accountability Study.

The academic medical center is one of just five U.S. hospitals cited for excellence in outpatient care. The medical center is also one of 115 facilities named a "top performer" for inpatient care in Vizient's 2024 Bernard A. Birnbaum, MD, Quality Leadership Study.

"These rankings reflect the collective efforts of our amazing teammates who uphold and advance the highest standards in healthcare delivery," said Chad T. Lefteris, president and CEO of UCI Health.

The medical center also was recently named one of "America's Great Hospitals" by *Becker's Hospital Review*, and the only one based in Orange County.



Dr. Miguel A. Villalona-Calero

LEADING CANCER SPECIALIST JOINS UCI HEALTH

Internationally recognized cancer expert Dr. Miguel A. Villalona-Calero has joined the UCI Health Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center as its deputy director and chief of the Division of Hematology-Oncology at the UC Irvine School of Medicine.

"Dr. Villalona-Calero brings a wealth of experience in designing new, more effective anticancer agents and translating laboratory breakthroughs into clinical trials," says Dr. Richard A. Van Etten, director of the cancer center and UC Irvine associate vice chancellor for cancer. "His expertise in genomic-driven therapies to repair cellular deficiencies in DNA and novel ways to use the immune system to target cancer will be instrumental in our efforts to deliver the most advanced care to our patients in Orange County and beyond."

As division chief, Villalona-Calero leads more than 70 oncologists and hematologists, including nationally known specialists in the many different forms of cancer. He most recently led an early-phase therapeutics program at City of Hope in Duarte. Villalona-Calero is a fellow of the prestigious American Association for the Advancement of Science and the American College of Physicians.

Living Life to the Fullest in High Gear

A genetic test gave doctors a clue that innovative immunotherapy might combat her late-stage cancer.

WRITTEN BY NANCY S. STEINER
PHOTOGRAPHED BY KIMBERLY PHAM

Two years ago, Linda Kiel’s life was transformed from that of an active retiree to being crippled with pain. In 2022, she developed kidney problems and needed a ureteral stent. Then in January 2023, the Mission Viejo woman — a retired middle school teacher, real estate professional and avid cyclist — was overcome with intolerable stomach pain.

Rushed to UCI Medical Center’s emergency department, Kiel was diagnosed with a bowel obstruction. Colorectal surgeon Dr. Joseph C. Carmichael found more than a blockage.

“We were surprised to find small cancer deposits all over her abdomen, just everywhere, obstructing multiple areas of the bowel. While they were numerous, they weren’t the kind that show up on imaging,” says Carmichael, who also serves as chief medical officer and senior vice president for UCI Health.

He performed a colostomy to reduce the pressure on Kiel’s intestines and took biopsies to diagnose her cancer. When Kiel awoke, Carmichael had to break the news: She had a colostomy bag bypassing her colon and stage IV abdominal cancer, a disease whose typical prognosis was six months at most.

Kiel was fortunate to be at UCI Health, whose Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center is the only National Cancer Institute-designated comprehensive cancer center based in Orange County. The center’s expert physician-researchers participate in more than 500 active clinical trials and provide state-of-the-art care that reflects the latest cancer findings.

With the opening of the cancer center’s second clinical hub in July at UCI Health — Irvine, this care is now closer and more accessible to patients like Kiel who live in coastal and southern Orange County. The state-of-the-art center triples the space available to deliver advanced cancer care.

Today Kiel knows well the importance of being treated by cancer experts who are at the top of their field and the forefront of innovation.



An avid hiker and cyclist, Linda Kiel completed the 102-mile Tour de Palm Springs ride less than a year after she was given mere months to live.

THE PROMISE OF IMMUNOTHERAPY

Soon after her surgery, Kiel began receiving care from Dr. Arash Rezazadeh Kalebasti, a medical oncologist who specializes in genitourinary tract cancers. She was diagnosed with metastatic urothelial carcinoma — cancer cells from the urinary tract lining — that had spread throughout her abdomen.

Before starting treatment, Rezazadeh studied the results of Kiel's molecular genetic testing. It showed she might respond to a particular targeted immunotherapy drug called Keytruda, first approved in 2014 to treat advanced melanoma. Subsequent clinical trials have resulted in its approval to treat a range of advanced cancers, including some types of lung, breast, prostate and cervical cancer, as well as metastatic urothelial carcinoma.

"Immunotherapy enables the immune system to see cancer and destroy it," Rezazadeh says. "Normally, cancer cells signal the immune system to ignore them. These drugs prevent the cancer cells from sending signals, allowing the immune system to recognize and attack them. Linda's genetic markers indicated she might respond to this approach."

Kiel began treatment in April 2023. At the time, she weighed 90 pounds and suffered from constant stomach pain and nausea. Two weeks later, she woke up without symptoms.

As her husband, Stephen Kiel, puts it, "On April 9, cancer was killing Linda. On April 10, Linda was killing the cancer."

Soon she began exercising and resumed long bike rides and mountain hikes. "I just thought, I'm going to live my life until it's over."

Kiel's treatment involves immunotherapy infusions every three weeks for two years. In her case, Rezazadeh did not prescribe chemotherapy, although for some patients he uses both therapies in tandem. She was also fortunate not to suffer any side effects from the drug.

"Immunotherapy can cause serious side effects in certain patients, and while we can't know which ones ahead of time, most patients can tolerate it," says Rezazadeh. "Linda did exceptionally well."

In fact, Kiel felt so much better by late summer of 2023, she asked Carmichael to remove her colostomy bag, which would



Kiel has resumed all the outdoor activities she loves, including snow trekking near Big Bear.

be hugely inconvenient for the Tour de Palm Springs, a 102-mile bike race she planned to enter in February.

OUTSTANDING RESULTS

Carmichael told her he'd first need to assess whether the bowel obstruction was sufficiently resolved. During the September 2023 procedure, he was amazed to discover the tumors that had been wrapped around her abdominal organs — including her kidney, colon and urinary tract — had completely disappeared.

"We went into the OR that day with

"We went into the OR that day with reasonable optimism, but we didn't know how great the results would be."

reasonable optimism, but we didn't know how great the results would be," the surgeon recalls. "The targeted therapy had been so effective, it was stunning."

"Dr. Carmichael was with me on the saddest day of my life and the happiest day of my life," Kiel says. "The saddest day was the diagnosis and colostomy bag. The happiest was getting the bag removed!"

Kiel still gets immunotherapy infusions as well as regular scans and blood tests, which show no evidence of cancer. Her doctors don't know her prognosis long-term, but Rezazadeh says he's had immunotherapy patients who have stayed in remission for years.

Meanwhile, Kiel wasted no time. She began intensive training for the race, including a 12-day bike ride in January. When she reached the finish line at the Tour de Palm Springs on Feb. 10, she held up a sign thanking UCI Health and the three doctors she credits with saving her life. The first two were Carmichael and Rezazadeh.

The third was for urologist Dr. Pengbo Jiang, who performed surgery to insert the stent from Kiel's kidney to her bladder in 2022. She had been experiencing a block in urine flow that was causing her one functioning kidney to fail. The stent allowed urine to pass and her remaining kidney to resume functioning normally.

COMPREHENSIVE CANCER CARE FOR ALL OF ORANGE COUNTY

While not every cancer patient can expect results like Kiel's, her case reflects the caliber and depth of care provided by UCI Health. The Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center has a specialized genitourinary cancer team that includes urologists, radiation oncologists and medical oncologists. Even the team's pathologists and radiologists also specialize in that type of cancer. Rezazadeh says team members all see the patient on the same visit.

Similar teams exist for brain, breast, gastrointestinal, gynecological, lung, liver, pancreatic and prostate cancers. Each specialized group follows the latest data, science and technologies in their field of cancer. They also conduct clinical trials and work with basic scientists at UC Irvine to bring breakthrough discoveries to patients.

This leading-edge care is now accessible at the new Chao Family Comprehensive

Cancer Center in Irvine. Located just north of university campus on Jamboree Road, the five-story, 225,000-square-foot facility offers the most advanced radiation oncology therapies and imaging services. It contains eight outpatient surgical suites, 52 private exam rooms, more than 40 infusion stations and a state-of-the-art women's health center.

It also was specifically designed to facilitate the "one-stop" team visits, meeting with patients simultaneously in a working space that promotes collaboration, communication and improved patient care.

Access to clinical trials is also important. A clinical trial, Rezazadeh explains, is often the best care for a patient because they are designed to test treatments that may improve on the standard of care.

"Even if a patient is not on a clinical trial here, they're coming to a place where their care is informed by the

latest clinical evidence and benefit from what the system is used to doing," says Carmichael. "We are used to treating the worst-prognosis cancers, the most severe recurrent tumors. And even patients without those types of cancer benefit from that knowledge and expertise."

"Linda is an example of this. She was not on a clinical trial per se, but she had a doctor who was forward-thinking enough to identify an immunotherapy that worked incredibly well."

For now, Kiel keeps pedaling and preparing for the 2025 Tour de Palm Springs. "I'm 75 years old, and I was supposed to die in July 2023, six months after my stage IV cancer diagnosis," she says. "I'm still here a year later, thanks to UCI. The battle was hard and the temptation to give up was enormous."

"I don't know how long I have, but I'm healthy and I not only have more time, but very high-quality time. I'm living for the moment and I'm very grateful." ■



Kiel poses in Slot Canyon at Anza Borrego State Park, where she and her husband go every year to see the spring wildflower bloom.

Learn more about the Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center at ucihealth.org/cancer-center





UCI Health President and CEO Chad Lefteris, pictured at the recent grand opening of a new cancer center and ambulatory care building in Irvine, says the organization's growth is all about bringing high-quality care closer to patients.

BRINGING HEALTHCARE TO YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

The expansion of UCI Health aims to make top-notch care convenient for everyone.

WRITTEN BY CATHY LAWHON

In the four years since becoming the chief executive and president of UCI Health, Chad Lefteris has overseen the organization's rapid expansion. Primary, specialty care and cancer care buildings have opened on the new UCI Health — Irvine campus. Next year, a 144-bed acute care hospital will open there. Last spring, with the acquisition of four Tenet community hospitals, UCI Health became one of California's largest providers of health services. The addition of the UCI Health Community Network's 858 beds is transforming the region's healthcare landscape, offering greater access to high-quality care. It also gives UCI Health the capacity to accept more patients in need of higher levels of care. We asked Lefteris to describe how the growth of Orange County's only academic health system benefits the Southern California community.

What is the No. 1 driver behind the growth of UCI Health across the region?

One reason we're spearheading the expansion of the UCI Health brand of healthcare across Southern California is to provide high-quality care with convenience, making it easier to access our incredible clinical experts. The last thing people should have to

worry about when they need medical care is how early they must to leave to avoid traffic.

The Tenet purchase establishes UCI Health hospitals in Lakewood, Los Alamitos, Fountain Valley and Placentia. How do you measure the scale of this transaction?

In a few different ways. It gives us an additional 858 licensed beds across four new locations. But bed count is no longer the best measure. So much of what we do is outpatient care that occurs beyond hospital walls. We are increasing our number of co-workers by 50% and our annual revenue by 40%.

What is the status of the UCI Health — Irvine medical campus on Jamboree Road?

The campus is opening in three phases. The Joe C. Wen & Family Center for Advanced Care opened at the end of April. It's a five-story, 168,000-square-foot outpatient facility that offers adult and pediatric primary care; digestive health, neuroscience, pain and orthopaedic services, as well as urgent care and extensive laboratory and imaging services. It's also the new home of the

Center for Autism & Neurodevelopmental Disorders. This summer, we opened the Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center and Ambulatory Care building, an incredible cancer center twice the size of the one at our UCI Medical Center campus in Orange. The bottom floor is an outpatient surgical center for all types of surgery. Finally, our full-service hospital and emergency department is set to open in late 2025.

You became CEO at a challenging time, amid uncertainties posed by COVID-19. What lessons did you learn that you value most?

Do you know how buffaloes run toward an oncoming storm so that they get through it more quickly? That's been our approach since my arrival. I remember a discussion early on about whether we should continue to expand throughout the community or put those plans on hold.

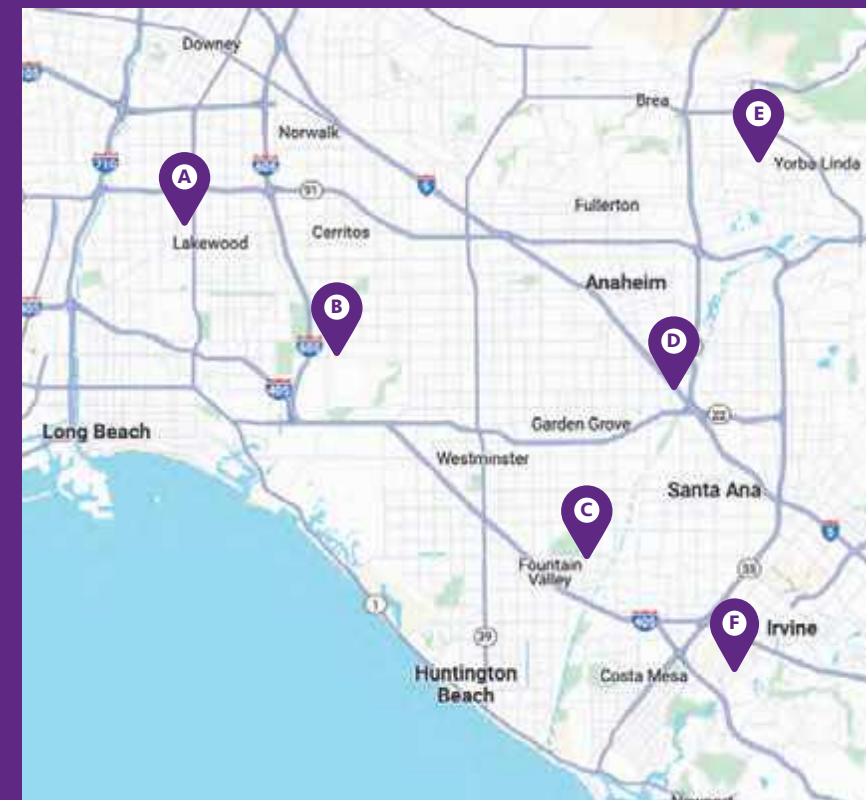
There was an argument for holding off because of COVID-19. But I knew that whatever the need was at that time, it would still be there when the pandemic was over. So after some sleepless nights, we went ahead. When most health systems were shrinking or frozen, we redeployed co-workers to new outpatient locations in the community and we started building UCI Health — Irvine. We came out of the pandemic stronger than when we went into it.

UCI Health seems to be booming. Is there room for still more growth?

We are building a 52-bed UCI Health Rehabilitation Hospital in partnership with Lifepoint Health that is less than 2 miles from the Irvine medical complex. It will allow us to provide essential acute physical rehabilitation to our patients. But we can't grow like this forever. The future will be less about bricks and mortar and more about identifying and growing services to meet the needs of the communities we serve.

Despite the pandemic, we also launched two new programs: Orange County's first adult bone marrow transplant program, which performs about 100 transplants a year, and the first adult complex cardiac ventricular assist device program. And our stellar kidney transplant team steadfastly cared for the huge population of people with end-stage renal disease, providing a functioning kidney and improved health for more than 200 patients last year alone.

We are so proud to be bringing our world-class care within reach of everyone in our region. ■



THE BIG PICTURE

UCI Health purchased four hospitals and associated outpatient locations from Tenet Healthcare Corporation this spring. The acquisition adds 858 inpatient beds to the 459 licensed beds at UCI Medical Center in Orange. UCI Health is now one of the largest healthcare providers in California, with six medical centers and more than 40 outpatient locations across the region.

A. UCI HEALTH — LAKEWOOD
(formerly Lakewood Regional Medical Center)
3700 E. South St., Lakewood

B. UCI HEALTH — LOS ALAMITOS
(formerly Los Alamitos Medical Center)
3751 Katella Ave., Los Alamitos

C. UCI HEALTH — FOUNTAIN VALLEY (formerly Fountain Valley Regional Hospital)
17100 Euclid St., Fountain Valley

D. UCI MEDICAL CENTER
101 The City Drive South, Orange

E. UCI HEALTH — PLACENTIA LINDA
(formerly Placentia-Linda Hospital)
1301 N. Rose Drive, Placentia

F. UCI HEALTH — IRVINE
19200 Jamboree Road, Irvine

Learn more about the future of UCI Health at ucihealth.org/transformation



TAVR to the Rescue

A retired dance professor gets a new lease on life with a minimally invasive heart procedure.

WRITTEN BY NANCY SOKOLER STEINER
PHOTOGRAPHED BY MICHAEL NEVEUX

Janice Plastino's heart was racing, but she was used to that. Diagnosed with a heart murmur at age 6, she began experiencing heart palpitations about 30 years ago. Once, when they became severe and unrelenting, the UC Irvine dance professor was rushed to a campus medical office where she was treated by Dr. Andrew R. Reikes.

The UCI Health internist and endocrinologist helped manage her heart condition successfully for over 25 years until recent tests showed the damage had become life-threatening. Only a decade ago, Plastino, now in her 80s, would have been out of options. But Reikes referred her to the UCI Health Structural Heart Disease Program team, whose specialists are leaders in transcatheter aortic valve replacement (TAVR). The minimally invasive procedure is a game-changer for older patients with valve problems who cannot undergo open-heart surgery.

"Today, TAVR is the therapy we offer most of our patients with symptomatic aortic valve stenosis who are over age 65," says Dr. Antonio Halais Frangieh, the UCI Health interventional cardiologist who performed Plastino's procedure.

In the decades before opting for TAVR, Plastino took medication for her condition and Reikes continued to order annual tests to monitor her heart. Occasionally she would still feel her heart racing, but it didn't stop her from enjoying a long career as a dancer, choreographer and researcher.

She was among the founding faculty members of the UC Irvine Department of Dance, eventually becoming a professor and one of the first in academia to conduct dance injury prevention research. She also co-authored a seminal book

on the creative and technical aspects of modern dance.

But at her annual visit in December 2022, Reikes said her aortic valve had narrowed so much that it no longer functioned well. She needed a valve replacement, he said, and Frangieh was the perfect choice to do it.

When Plastino met with Frangieh, he explained how he would repair her aortic valve. The TAVR procedure involves inserting a catheter (a thin, hollow tube) into a blood vessel in her groin and threading it through the arteries to the heart. There, an artificial valve, compressed like a folded umbrella in the catheter, is placed inside the faulty valve, where it springs open and allows blood to flow normally.

Next, a multidisciplinary team of interventional cardiologists, cardiothoracic surgeons, specialists in heart imaging and anesthesiology conferred to assess her case and form a treatment plan. Plastino, they agreed, was an ideal candidate for TAVR.

"What we do goes beyond the procedure itself," Frangieh says. "It's the assessment, planning and selection of the procedure, plus performing it in the best setting to ensure the best outcome."

In January 2023, a preliminary test confirmed that Plastino's anatomy was compatible with TAVR. A week later, she arrived at the hospital early in the morning for the procedure and went home the next afternoon.

"It was like zap, done, finished," she recalls. "I had some pain in the groin for one night and that was it. The team was fabulous. They're clearly experts who know what they're doing. And they're so personable."

TAVR is now performed on a much broader range of patients today than when it was first approved in the United States in 2011.

"With cumulative experience, the operation has evolved, and the technology has improved too," Frangieh says. "Today's valve and delivery system is way more advanced in terms of engineering and design, making the procedure even safer and more efficient."

Plastino marvels at how a major heart procedure could be such a non-event. "My friend had a valve replaced 10 years ago, and they had to open him up three times in a four-day period to fix all the problems," she says. "He almost died, and it took him forever to recuperate."

Her friends didn't realize she'd had a procedure because she returned to her regular activities so quickly. She putters in the garden and makes dinner daily for her husband, Richard, who still works full time at the family business. She also walks 2 miles a day with the couple's new puppy and loves spending time with her daughter and family.

Plastino gets cardiology checkups every six months but she no longer feels her heart fluttering out of control.

"I'm just so happy to be here and watch my family thrive," she says.

She recommends the TAVR procedure and Frangieh for anyone experiencing heart valve issues.

"It's simple, straightforward, done and out," Plastino says. "The longer someone hesitates, the worse their condition will get. I would probably be dead by now without this intervention." ■

Learn more about the procedure
at ucihealth.org/TAVR



Janice Plastino, a former dancer, choreographer and dance professor, is gliding through her days once again after undergoing a heart valve procedure.



Supporters gather for the new cancer center's ribbon-cutting ceremony. Officials holding scissors, from left, are UCI Health President and CEO Chad Lefteris, UC Irvine School of Medicine Dean Michael Stamos, UC Irvine Chancellor Howard Gillman, Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center Director Richard Van Etten and Steven Goldstein, UC Irvine vice chancellor for health affairs.



Among the first patients treated at the new center was enthusiastic Rancho Santa Margarita resident Wendy Garcia. "It's so gorgeous and vibrant, just look at the view!"

NEW CANCER CENTER IN IRVINE OPENS ITS DOORS

The UCI Health Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center and Ambulatory Care building welcomed its first patients on July 16. The five-story, 225,000-square-foot facility, located on the newly opened UCI Health — Irvine medical campus, is designed to provide everything a patient needs in an environmentally friendly building close to home.



Visitors touring the new center were able to try out a surgical robot and learn how surgeons use this minimally invasive technology.



UC Irvine mascot Peter the Anteater greets visitors at the grand opening celebration.

PHOTOS FOR UCI HEALTH

UCI HEALTH PHOTOS



Fountain Valley co-workers turn out in force for a party to celebrate becoming UCI Health — Fountain Valley.



Co-workers at UCI Health — Los Alamitos celebrate becoming part of the new UCI Health Community Network.



Nurse educator Candace Tingle was among throngs of co-workers celebrating at UCI Health — Placentia Linda.



Pounds of brightly colored confetti were unleashed for the kickoff celebration at UCI Health — Lakewood after UCI Health President and CEO Chad T. Lefteris, pictured in photo at right, welcomed co-workers to the UCI Health Community Network.

TENET EMPLOYEES WELCOMED TO UCI HEALTH

Earlier this year, UCI Health acquired four hospitals and associated outpatient locations from Tenet Healthcare Corporation. UCI Health held celebrations to welcome co-workers at each of the four hospital locations in Fountain Valley, Lakewood, Los Alamitos and Placentia to the UCI Health Community Network. The new hospitals were formerly known as Fountain Valley Regional Hospital, Lakewood Regional Medical Center, Los Alamitos Medical Center and Placentia Linda Hospital.



HEALTH CLASSES

Our health classes can help improve your well-being and prevent disease. Nearly all are free, but some do have fees. Most classes are held online via Zoom.

All classes are one session unless otherwise noted, and registration is required. Visit ucihealth.org/events or call 657-282-6357 for more information.

ACUPRESSURE FOR LABOR PAIN
Oct. 10, Nov. 14, Dec. 12 | 7–8 p.m.

ADVANCE DIRECTIVES
Dec. 12 | Noon–1:30 p.m.

BARIATRIC SURGERY & WEIGHT LOSS
Oct. 15, Nov. 19, Dec. 17 | 6–7 p.m.

BREASTFEEDING
Nov. 7, Dec. 5 | 6–9 p.m.

CHILDBIRTH PREPARATION (four classes)
Oct. 9, 16, 23, 30 | 6–8 p.m.
Nov. 20, 27, Dec. 4, 11 | 6–8 p.m.

DIABETES WORKSHOP
Oct. 30, Nov. 27 | 3:30–4:30 p.m.

HEALTHY LIVING (English & Spanish)
Oct. 22; Nov. 5, 19; Dec. 3, 17 | 3–4 p.m., English; 4–5 p.m., Spanish
To register for English classes, call 714-456-7514.
To register for Spanish classes, call 714-456-3739.

LIVING WELL WITH HEART FAILURE
Dec. 10 | 3:30–5 p.m.

NEWBORN CARE
Oct. 10, Nov. 14, Dec. 12 | 6–9 p.m.

NEW MOTHER SUPPORT
Nov. 1, Dec. 6 | 1–3 p.m.

PRENATAL PELVIC FLOOR WORKSHOP
Nov. 2 | 1–2 p.m.



PREPARING FOR SURGERY — MIND, BODY AND SPIRIT
Nov. 4, Dec. 2 | Noon–1:30 p.m.

PLANT-BASED COOKING WORKSHOP
Oct. 22 | Noon–1 p.m.

STROKE PREVENTION
English: Nov. 27 | 4–5 p.m.
Spanish: Nov. 26 | 4–5 p.m.
To register, call 866-STROKE-3 (866-787-6533).

MEDICARE OPTIONS FOR 2025

Learn about new 2025 Medicare rules, plan changes and offerings at UCI Health at one of our free informational classes. Classes will cover basic Medicare, Medicare Supplemental plans and Medicare Advantage PPO plans.

Oct. 15, 16, 18, 24, 30; Nov. 5, 6, 14, 20, 26; Dec. 4 | 5–6:30 p.m.

For questions or to register, call 714-456-2210. Registration is required to receive the Zoom link. All classes are hosted by a UCI Health representative.

EVENTS

NEWPORT BEACH LIBRARY “MEDICINE IN OUR BACKYARD” LECTURES

Oct. 28 | “Understanding osteoarthritis and treatment options”
Ryan DiGiovanni, MD, UCI Health orthopaedic surgeon



Nov. 18 | “Understanding headaches: Identifying triggers and mastering relief strategies”
Crystal Jicha, MD, UCI Health neurologist

Jan. 27, 2025 | “Integrative health, nutrition, food allergies and you”
Kiran Sachdev, MD, director of UCI Health Integrative Gastroenterology Services

Doors open at 6:30 p.m. Presentations begin at 7 p.m. followed by Q&A. Newport Beach Central Library, 1000 Avocado Ave. Visit nbplf.foundation/programs/medicine-in-our-backyard to register for free.

SUE & BILL GROSS STEM CELL RESEARCH CENTER COMMUNITY LECTURES

Oct. 29 | “Making new blood vessels: tissue engineering and angiogenesis”
Christopher Hughes, PhD

Nov. 26 | “The aging of blood stem cells”
Minji Byun, PhD

Jan. 14 | “Use and application of stem cells in human bone toxicology”
Nicole Sparks, PhD, and Stacy Schkoda, PhD

These free in-person seminars are held at Gross Hall, 845 Health Sciences Road, Irvine. Presentations begin at 7 p.m. To register, email stemcell@uci.edu or call 949-824-3990.

UCI Health and UC Irvine are proud to sponsor community events and lectures on a variety of health issues.

GAVIN HERBERT EYE INSTITUTE COMMUNITY LECTURES



Nov. 5 | “What is dry eye and how is it treated?”
Soroosh Behshad, MD

Dec. 3 | “Improve your quality of life while living with low vision”
Karen Lin, OD, and Nilima Tanna, OT

Jan. 14, 2025 | “Cataracts: The latest in surgery technology”
Soorosh Behshad, MD

Feb. 4 | “Eye cancer: What it is and how do I know if I have it?”
Lilangi Ediriwickrema, MD; Olivia Lee, MD; and Kapil Mishra, MD

Visit ophthalmology.uci.edu/events to register for these free online lectures, which begin at 7 p.m. Email ghei@uci.edu or call 949-824-7243 to learn more.

SUPPORT GROUPS

To learn more about our support groups, call the numbers listed or visit ucihealth.org/events

ADVANCED HEART FAILURE & VAD
714-456-7514

BARIATRIC SUPPORT GROUP
alisont3@hs.uci.edu

BURN SURVIVORS
714-456-7437

CANCER NUTRITION SUPPORT GROUP
agebhar1@hs.uci.edu

CHRONIC LYMPHOCYTIC LEUKEMIA
tevans@cllsociety.org

FACIAL PAIN ASSOCIATION
octnafpa@yahoo.com

INFLAMMATORY BOWEL DISEASE
714-456-7057

KOREAN WOMEN’S CANCER SUPPORT GROUP
714-875-4658

LIVER DISEASE SUPPORT GROUP
714-456-7624

MEN’S CANCER SUPPORT GROUP
714-456-5812

MULTIPLE MYELOMA
800-452-2873, ext. 233

OSTOMY ASSOCIATION OF ORANGE COUNTY
714-637-7971

PANCREATIC CANCER
714-456-7057

PARKINSON’S DISEASE
blagasse@hs.uci.edu

STROKE
866-STROKE-3 (866-787-6533)

YOUNG ADULT CANCER
caps@hs.uci.edu



Sisters Rhea Hickman, left, and Tara Hickman navigated bariatric surgery and weight-loss success together.

PHOTO BY KIMBERLY PHAM

WEIGHT LOSS: BETTER TOGETHER

Two years ago, Tara Hickman, 36, decided to try a new strategy in her years-long battle with weight. She met with UCI Health surgeon Dr. Shaun Daly and scheduled bariatric surgery. Soon after, her sister Rhea Hickman, 42, who was also discouraged by her weight, decided to join Tara. They both underwent gastric sleeve surgery, which removes a portion of the stomach. The sisters, who are best friends and own a home together, drew inspiration from each other as they navigated surgery, recovery and rapid weight loss. Today Tara has lost 120 pounds, while Rhea, who underwent breast cancer treatment earlier this year, has lost 106 pounds. The Hickman sisters, who reside in Irvine, agree on most things including this: The decision to undergo weight-loss surgery was one of their very best.

“ We were very active growing up. As we got older and weren’t playing sports anymore, we became sedentary and started gaining weight through college. We had tried every diet you can think of. We would lose weight, then gain it back and then some. It got to a point where we needed help.

There is a six-month process to prepare for this surgery. We went to a dietitian, a nutritionist and a social worker and did all our required presurgery steps. We tracked everything we were eating and scheduled our surgeries one day apart. The hospital care was great. There is an amazing team at UCI Health, and everyone took the time to make sure we were doing well each step of the way.

The procedure has affected our lives positively in every way possible. Life is easier now — moving around, traveling, clothes shopping. One of the simple pleasures now is putting on the airplane seat belt without struggling. We still love to cook and eat out, but a bite or two of something is all it takes now to be satisfied.

We both stopped losing weight when we reached about 200 pounds. Rhea’s cancer diagnosis stalled her weight loss for about six months. Now she is cancer-free, and we are both taking semaglutide treatment to facilitate more weight loss. It has helped us both push past our plateaus.

We’ve had blood tests to check our cholesterol, blood sugar, etc., and all are normal. We’ve never experienced that before. We’re back to being active and finally enjoy working out again. If we’re sitting around for too long, one of us will say, ‘Let’s take a walk.’

We’ve always been very positive, social, happy people. Having this surgery has only elevated that for us. Doing this together and having each other’s support was everything. Dr. Daly said not to compare one another’s journeys and milestones because, although we are experiencing this together, we are different people. We had a few different side effects after surgery, but it was nice having someone who knows exactly what you are going through. That was the best part.

— Tara Hickman and Rhea Hickman



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Choose a UCI Health primary care doctor today.

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UCI Health

Learn more about weight-loss surgery
at ucihealth.org/bariatric



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