

COMING SOON: A REHABILITATION  
HOSPITAL UNLIKE ANY OTHER

A STEM-CELL THERAPY TRIAL SHOWS  
PROMISE FOR LUPUS PATIENTS

**UCI Health**

WINTER 2026

# live well

EXCEPTIONAL HEALTHCARE FOR SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



## Defying the Odds

A groundbreaking clinical trial gives late-stage gastric cancer patient a second chance.

# FIVE DECADES OF INNOVATION, AND MUCH MORE TO COME



In 1976, the University of California purchased the Orange County Medical Center in Orange and named it UCI Medical Center. Today, as we approach the 50th anniversary of that acquisition, we celebrate five decades of astonishing growth that has seen the training of thousands of physicians and health professionals and brought the most sophisticated medical care to our community and beyond.

Today we are UCI Health, an accessible academic health system of six hospitals and more than two dozen outpatient locations. Along with our flagship hospital, now known as UCI Health — Orange, our network encompasses hospitals in Fountain Valley, Lakewood,

Los Alamitos and Placentia. In December, we welcomed patients to UCI Health — Irvine, a next-generation hospital designed to deliver the most advanced care in an atmosphere that embraces nature and promotes healing.

On page 14 in this issue of *Live Well*, you'll see the joyous images celebrating the grand opening of the seven-story, acute care hospital and 24-hour emergency department. We are so proud of the skilled UCI Health professionals who helped conceive, design and open this beautiful, healing space. The hospital joins the Joe C. Wen & Family Center for Advanced Care and the Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center and Ambulatory Care building to complete our \$1.3 billion Irvine medical campus, bringing the finest, research-driven medical care closer to the people of coastal and south Orange County.

We'll soon be adding a seventh hospital, a much-needed inpatient rehabilitation center for people needing extended care to recover from stroke, traumatic injuries and other serious conditions. On page 10, you can read about UCI Health — Irvine Rehabilitation Hospital, opening this summer in Irvine.

Ultimately, however, buildings are just bricks and mortar. What truly sets us apart are our caregivers and our commitment to innovation in medicine. On page 6, learn about a novel treatment protocol devised by UCI Health doctors determined to improve the survival of people with advanced gastric cancer. A nationwide clinical trial on that promising protocol is now underway, led by a UCI Health surgeon. On page 12, we invite you to read about another potentially groundbreaking clinical trial that has brought a lupus patient the first significant relief from her debilitating disease in nearly two decades.

As a new year unfolds, we wish you and your family the very best health. We're here, in multiple locations throughout the region, to help you achieve that goal and to assist you should illness strike. Rest assured, our healthcare professionals, clinicians and the research scientists at UC Irvine are united in their mission to discover the medical advances that will make the next 50 years even brighter.

Sincerely,

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

## UCI Health

**VICE CHANCELLOR, HEALTH AFFAIRS, UC IRVINE**  
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**MARKETING DIRECTOR, UCI HEALTH**  
Camila Hernandez

**COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR, UCI HEALTH**  
John D. Murray

**PUBLICATIONS MANAGER, UCI HEALTH**  
Kristina Lindgren

**DESIGN & EDITORIAL CONTRIBUTORS**  
Moontide Agency

**PARTNER & BRAND PUBLISHER**  
Emily S. Baker

**ART DIRECTOR**  
Ajay Peckham

**EDITOR**  
Shari Roan

**COPY EDITOR**  
Laura L. Watts

For comments or questions, contact  
UCI Health Marketing & Communications at  
3800 W. Chapman Ave., Suite 2400, Orange, CA 92868  
714-456-5496

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 UCI Health, the research of our clinicians and scientists, to thank a caregiver or honor a loved one's memory, email [supporthealth@uci.edu](mailto:supporthealth@uci.edu), call 714-456-7350 or visit [ucihealth.org/giving](http://ucihealth.org/giving).

# DETECTING NONSMOKERS AT RISK FOR GENE-DRIVEN LUNG CANCER

WRITTEN BY LAUREL DIGANGI

Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer-related U.S. deaths, each year taking more lives than breast, colon and prostate cancers combined. Early screening and treatment for lung cancer in its initial stages — before symptoms arise — can save lives, says UCI Health thoracic surgeon Dr. Hari B. Keshava.

Lung cancer is detected early in only about 20% of patients, in large part because too few people in high-risk groups such as smokers are getting screened. Keshava believes current screening recommendations may be leaving out even more people who could benefit. That's why he has launched a clinical trial to screen non-smoking family members of lung cancer patients who have driver mutations such as EGFR, ALK, MET or ROS1 to see if they, too, are at risk.

"We're seeing a lot more patients without a smoking history who still get lung cancer," says Keshava. "We want to see if there's a genetic predisposition or potentially an environmental exposure history that could be common among family members of lung cancer patients."

Current screening recommendations from the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force and American Cancer Society do not include adults who, regardless of smoking status, may have genetic predispositions to lung cancer. About 5% to 10% of lung cancers are believed to be caused by inherited genetic mutations.

Keshava, principal investigator of the clinical trial at the UCI Health Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center, is screening immediate relatives of lung cancer patients with a driver mutation who are between the ages of 40 and 80 and do not fit current screening recommendations.

Too often, the disease is detected in advanced stages, says the surgeon, an assistant professor at the UC Irvine School

of Medicine's Division of Thoracic Surgery. "If a patient has a persistent cough or is coughing up blood, their cancer is in the later stages when it's more deadly."

Current guidelines call for screening symptom-free adults ages 50 to 80 with a 20 "pack-year" smoking history who currently smoke or have quit within the last 15 years. A pack-year is equal to smoking one pack a day for a year or its equivalent.

Screening is simple. "You sit in a CT machine, which is open — not claustrophobic like an MRI — and the scan lasts only about 30 seconds," Keshava says. "It's also very low-dose radiation, the equivalent of a plane flight from L.A. to New York."

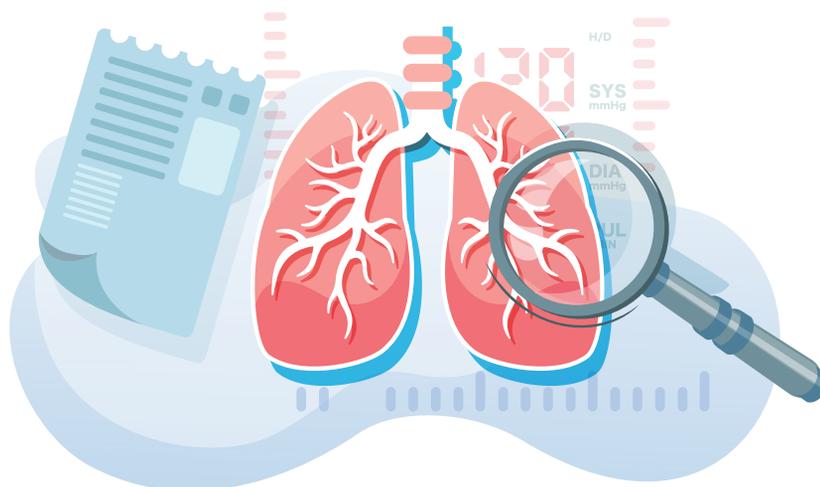
The scan allows doctors to inspect the lungs for any masses or nodules in trial participants. "If any abnormalities are found, we notify the patient's primary care physician, pulmonologist or cardiologist, and they go through the usual pathways of care," he says. "We will also follow up with study participants for the next three years,

particularly if there's an abnormality."

Many smokers or ex-smokers don't get screened out of fear or embarrassment, Keshava believes. "Patients may not want to admit how much they smoked. But we're not here to judge. If I can find an early-stage cancer, I can remove it and the patient potentially could be cancer free."

Treatment options for lung cancer are improving, including minimally invasive robot-assisted surgery, precision radiation therapy and chemotherapy. In addition, genetic testing of tumors can open the door to targeted therapies. Still, the earlier a tumor is found, he says, the higher the chances of a cure.

Keshava hopes to enroll as many as 1,700 family members of lung cancer patients with driver mutations in the clinical trial. People who want to participate may call 877-827-8839. ■



## FACTS ON LUNG CANCER AND SCREENING

- Lung cancer is the leading cause of U.S. cancer death in men and women.
- Only about 18% of eligible Americans are screened for lung cancer.
- About 80% of lung cancer deaths are caused by smoking.
- Up to 10% of lung cancers are caused by inherited genetic mutations.

Source: American Lung Association.

Learn more at [ucihealth.org/lung-screening-trial](https://ucihealth.org/lung-screening-trial)



## UCI HEALTH TOPS THE LIST FOR PHYSICIANS OF EXCELLENCE

More than 215 UCI Health doctors have been recognized as 2026 Physicians of Excellence by the Orange County Medical Association — more than any other health system in the region. For 22 years, the medical association has honored physicians whose excellence in skill, training and commitment to their patients and the community elevates them above their peers.

The list, published in the January 2026 issue of *Orange Coast Magazine*, includes nearly 700 Orange County physicians across some 75 clinical specialties. The program is regarded as having a fair and unbiased process for selecting Physicians of Excellence awardees. To be eligible for recognition, physicians must:

- Be certified by a member board within the American Board of Medical Specialties, the American Board of Osteopathic Medical Specialties or an equivalent entity recognized by the Medical Board of California or the Osteopathic Medical Board of California.
- Be in good standing with the Medical Board of California or Osteopathic Medical Board of California.
- Have maintained their primary practice in Orange County for the last five years.
- Have practiced within their specialty for the last five years.

Doctors also must demonstrate achievements in at least two of the following areas: physician leadership, teaching/mentoring, medical research/scientific advances, humanitarian service and unique contributions in community service.



### IMPRESSIVE GRANT ADVANCES STEM CELL THERAPY FOR HUNTINGTON'S DISEASE

UCI Health neurobiologist Leslie M. Thompson, PhD, has been awarded nearly \$12 million by the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine to advance a clinical trial to test neural stem cell therapy for Huntington's disease.

The study will focus on whether the therapy can protect brain cells, repair damaged brain circuits and slow or

prevent disease progression. It will be the first time embryonic stem cell-derived cells are tested in humans with the genetic disorder. Thompson's team has tested the therapy extensively in preclinical safety and efficacy studies.

Huntington's disease gradually destroys brain cells, usually starting between ages 30 and 50 and worsening over time. Symptoms include involuntary movements, difficulty thinking and planning daily tasks, and mood changes such as depression. Currently, there are no treatments to alter the course of this devastating disorder, only medications that help manage symptoms. The therapy being tested, called hNSC-01, uses neural stem cells to protect existing brain cells from dying, to replace lost cells and rebuild damaged brain circuits, to release helpful brain proteins that are low in Huntington's patients and also reduce harmful protein clumps that damage cells.

"This trial is a first step toward changing the course of Huntington's disease," says Thompson, a Donald Bren and Chancellor's Professor in the departments of Psychiatry & Human Behavior and Neurobiology & Behavior at UC Irvine. "It is giving hope to patients and families who now have very few options."

The trial will be conducted by the UCI Alpha Clinic, the clinical trial arm of the Sue and Bill Gross Stem Cell Research Center. Thompson eventually hopes to enroll about 20 people with early-stage Huntington's disease.

### NICU GETS GOLD AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE

The neonatal intensive care unit at UCI Health — Orange, the flagship academic medical center of the UCI Health system, received the prestigious gold level



Beacon Award for Excellence. The neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) is the first in Orange County and second in California to earn the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses' honor.

The award signifies exceptional nursing care, improved outcomes, greater overall satisfaction and adherence to the highest standards of acute and critical care nursing.

"This is a testament to the exceptional family-centered care delivered during every shift by all UCI Health NICU nurses and to the medical leaders who foster a healthy work environment to support excellent outcomes and a culture of continuous improvement," said Anne Marie Watkins, UCI Health chief nursing executive and senior vice president.

The medical center was also recognized by *U.S. News & World Report* as one of its 2025 Best Hospitals for Maternity Care for the fifth consecutive year.



The 144-bed hospital and 24-hour emergency department is the centerpiece of the 13.5-acre Irvine medical campus. See more photos on pages 14 and 15.

## CELEBRATING A NEW HOSPITAL IN IRVINE

UCI Health opened the doors to its sixth hospital in December, a seven-story next-generation center that brings the academic health system's unique brand of high-quality care closer to more residents of Orange County. Also in December, flagship hospital UCI Health — Orange received another "A" Leapfrog Hospital Safety Grade. Only the top 30% of U.S. hospitals receive the organization's highest safety recognition.

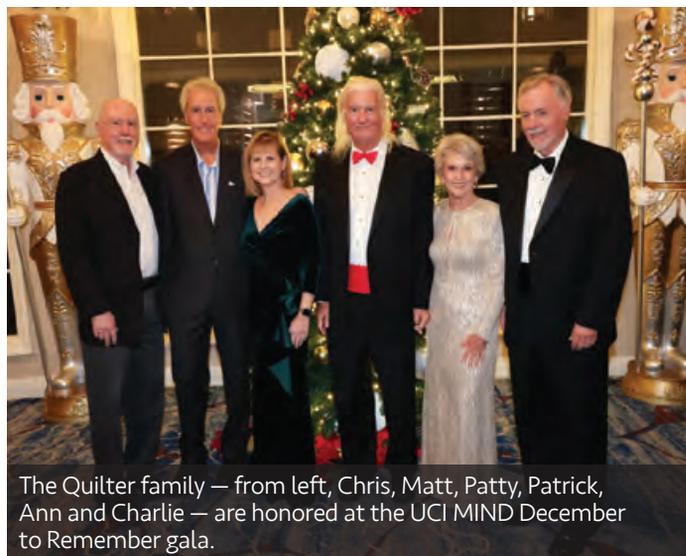
## QUILTER FAMILY DONATION KICKSTARTS NEW DEMENTIA CENTER

With a \$50 million lead gift from the Quilter family and about \$30 million in new commitments, the UC Irvine Institute for Memory Impairments and Neurological Disorders (UCI MIND) is now planning a state-of-the-art research and care facility to enhance its position as a global leader in research and patient care for Alzheimer's disease and related dementias.

UC Irvine alumni Charles Quilter, MA '06, PhD '10, and Ann Quilter, MS '79, along with family members Patrick, Chris, Matt and Patty, made the generous contribution to UCI MIND. Their gift has inspired others to pledge support, including Harriet Harris, the Brethren Community Foundation, Michael K. Hayde and Laura Khouri, and Keith Swayne. Together, total contributions for the proposed new building already have grown to nearly \$80 million.

An estimated 7.2 million Americans ages 65 and older are living with Alzheimer's disease — a number projected to increase significantly in the coming decades. In Orange County, Alzheimer's is the third leading cause of death.

UC Irvine is in the early stages of developing the new UCI MIND facility. It will have both research and clinical spaces where interdisciplinary teams from across campus will collaborate and where patients will have access to the latest innovations. In addition, the new home for UCI MIND will have spaces for education and community outreach.



The Quilter family — from left, Chris, Matt, Patty, Patrick, Ann and Charlie — are honored at the UCI MIND December to Remember gala.

"It will be a hub for discovery and hope," says Joshua Grill, director of UCI MIND. "New treatments will be tested and the path toward dementia prevention will be blazed. Thanks to the Quilter family's vision and leadership, this facility will bring together science, care and community to accelerate progress and amplify our impact."

# In Great Hands

Determined doctors and a trail-blazing clinical trial have given a man with advanced stomach cancer a new lease on life.

WRITTEN BY SHARI ROAN  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY REMY HAYNES

One of the few things that gave Mauricio Alvarez consolation in those painful weeks after being diagnosed with terminal cancer was his unshakeable religious faith and a life insurance policy he knew would provide for his family.

It wasn't until late December 2023, two months after learning he had advanced gastric cancer, that Alvarez learned from UCI Health cancer specialists about an experimental study that could extend his life.

Alvarez was in bad shape when physicians at Loma Linda University Medical Center said he had at most a year to live. But one doctor referred him to a former colleague, UCI Health surgical oncologist Dr. Maheswari Senthil, who had devised a unique approach to treat the deadly disease.

"By then I was in so much pain I could barely stand or even sit," recalls Alvarez, a mechanical engineer who lives in Riverside.

Today, Alvarez, now 61, is in remission after treatment by Senthil and medical oncologist Dr. Farshid Dayyani as part of a highly promising clinical trial they launched at the UCI Health Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center, the only National Cancer Institute-designated center based in Orange County.

Called STOPGAP, the clinical trial emerged from their mutual frustration with the lack of treatment options for patients like Alvarez. Stage IV gastric cancer, also called stomach cancer, has an average survival rate of less than a year and disproportionately affects Latinos and younger adults.

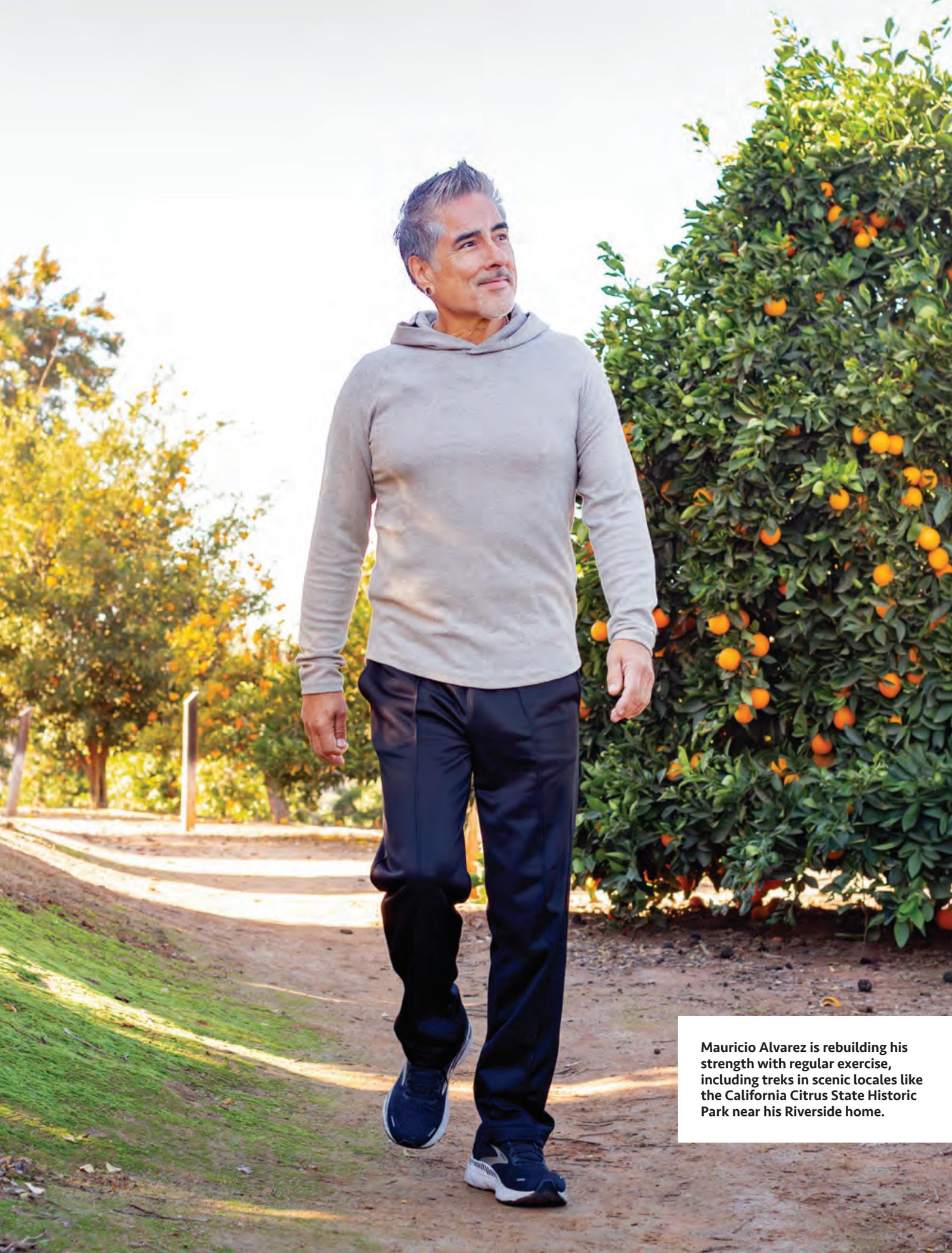
Standard treatment for cancer that has spread beyond the stomach walls is systemic chemotherapy. But it ultimately fails because chemotherapy administered intravenously cannot penetrate the abdomen's peritoneal lining.

Senthil and Dayyani developed a pilot project to combine intravenous (IV) therapy with a second regimen of chemotherapy delivered directly into the abdominal cavity through a peritoneal port for a minimum of three months. Some patients then undergo surgery to remove all visible tumors in the abdominal cavity, which is then bathed with chemotherapy to kill any lingering microscopic cancer cells.

Senthil, an internationally regarded expert in peritoneal malignancies, first learned of an intraperitoneal chemotherapy treatment protocol from studies in Asia, where gastric cancer is far more common. She significantly modified the protocol to include surgical remove of all the intra-abdominal cancer in suitable patients.

"We didn't have anything for patients with advanced gastric cancer," she says. "It's such an emotional thing to have to tell patients that. We wanted to do something other than say, 'We don't have anything to offer you.' The approach has a strong rationale, but these are complex trials. You need good oncologic support to be able to do these trials for our patients."

When she first joined UCI Health, Senthil shared the idea of testing the treatment protocol with Dayyani, who called it "a great idea." She started working at UCI Health on May 1, 2020. "We submitted the entire clinical trial protocol on May 29," she says.



**Mauricio Alvarez is rebuilding his strength with regular exercise, including treks in scenic locales like the California Citrus State Historic Park near his Riverside home.**

## A DIAGNOSIS WITHOUT HOPE

Alvarez, who had long suffered from what community doctors said were ulcers, developed severe stomach pain and was rushed to Loma Linda on Oct. 31, 2023. Two weeks later, tests revealed advanced gastric cancer. Physicians performed surgery to relieve a blockage caused by a tumor, but they said there was little else they could do besides keep him comfortable.

"I was discouraged," says Alvarez, a father of seven and grandfather of 10. "My wife was crying. I told her, 'I have an insurance policy to make sure you will be taken care of. Everything is going to be fine.' Arlene looked at me and said, 'We don't care about the money. We want you.'"

The referral to UCI Health was a turning point.

"When I saw Dr. Dayyani, he just lit up the room," Alvarez says. "He said, 'There's a clinical trial and there are so many things that we can do for you.' He was nothing but positive."

Alvarez underwent further testing and aggressive chemotherapy. He continued to lose weight and was in severe pain.

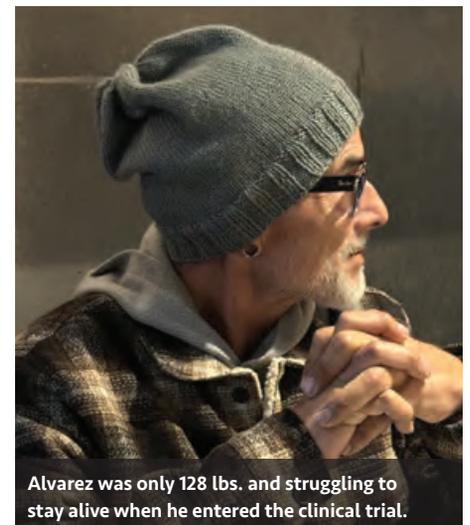
"I was in a wheelchair and weighed 128 pounds," he recalls. "I had weighed 218 pounds in good health. Dr. Senthil said, 'I have good news for you. We think the clinical trial can help you, but I need you to understand the stages of treatment and consequences of it.'"

Alvarez had already decided. "I told her, 'I'm in good hands. I have hope and faith.'"

## CLINICAL TRIALS SAVE LIVES

Senthil and Dayyani received grant money for a pilot project from the UC Irvine Anti-Cancer Challenge, a cycling rally founded in 2017 to raise funds for innovative, homegrown cancer research. In 2021, they began testing the concept in the early-phase clinical trial.

Results of the initial STOPGAP trial, which has enrolled 33 patients since 2021, were presented to the scientific community at the recent annual ASCO Gastrointestinal Cancers Symposium in San Francisco. Senthil has leveraged the study's success to launch STOPGAP II, a national, randomized, controlled clinical trial funded by the National Cancer



Alvarez was only 128 lbs. and struggling to stay alive when he entered the clinical trial.

Institute and supported by the Eastern Cooperative Oncology group.

The phase 2/3 trial is now open to patients at UCI Health and will be opening at dozens of leading U.S. cancer centers

with the support of the prestigious National Clinical Trials Network. Senthil is the principal investigator.

"Mauricio's response to the treatment has been great," says Senthil, a professor



Alvarez participated in the ceremonial puck drop Nov. 20 at the UCI Health and Anaheim Ducks Hockey Fights Cancer night.

**“This is a perfect place for us to keep pushing the envelope.”**

and John Wayne Cancer Foundation Endowed Chair in Surgical Oncology who leads the UC Irvine School of Medicine’s Division of Surgical Oncology. “These are the kinds of patients we’re trying to help. We are starting with a diagnosis that has an extremely grim prognosis. But we can change the outcomes through a clinical trial and by offering surgery to the right group of patients.”

In STOPGAP II, participants in one trial arm will receive the standard-of-care intravenous chemotherapy; the others will receive the original STOPGAP protocol of IV chemotherapy and direct intraperitoneal chemotherapy. After

the course of chemotherapy treatment, eligible patients in both groups can undergo cytoreduction surgery.

Home to the Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center, UCI Health is the right setting for innovative trials that begin with a bright idea, Senthil says.

“The Anti-Cancer Challenge is focused on supporting these kinds of investigator-initiated clinical trials. There also has to be collaboration. The institution is very practiced in doing this kind of work.”

She noted that the cancer center’s Stern Center for Cancer Clinical Trials and Research, led by Dayyani, has a “dedicated research staff that makes it possible for us to do those trials. This is a perfect place for us to keep pushing the envelope.”

#### **PERSEVERANCE WINS THE DAY**

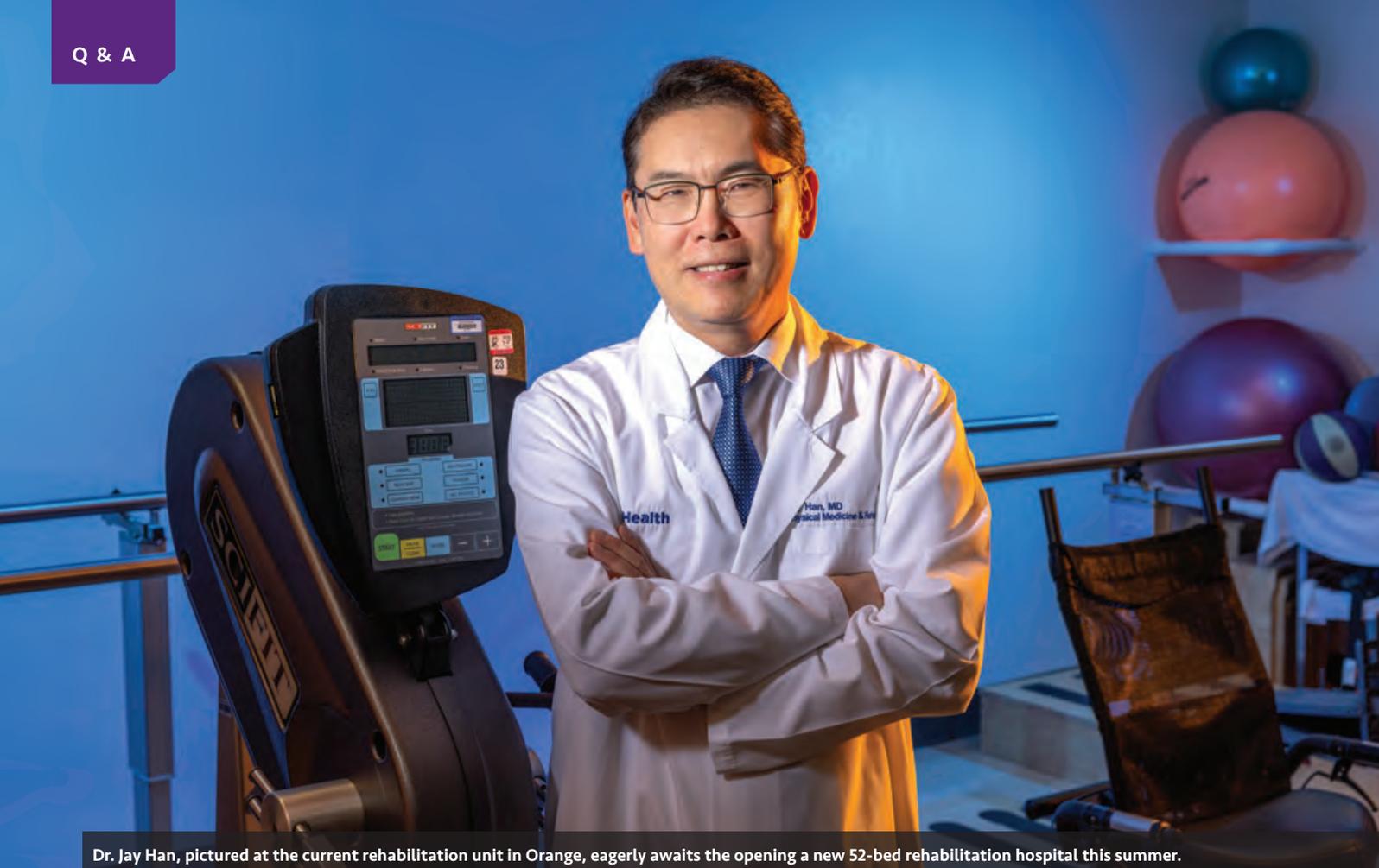
The treatment wasn’t easy, Alvarez says. Chemotherapy caused body aches, nausea and cognitive difficulties. Finally, on July 17, 2024, he underwent surgery to remove all visible tumors from his abdominal cavity and direct peritoneal chemotherapy.

“I will never forget the day of surgery,” he says. “I was still weak and tired, but trying to make the best of it. But I was able to leave the hospital seven days later.”

Since then, Alvarez has worked to regain his strength. Periodic tests and checkups show that he remains cancer free. He also takes an immunotherapy medication to prevent recurrence. Now 185 pounds, he is exercising and thinking about the future. He battles neuropathy in his hands — nerve damage from chemotherapy. But he thinks that’s a small price to pay for getting a second chance at life.

“Nobody believes I had cancer,” he says, with a laugh. “I honestly didn’t know much about UCI Health two years ago. But since then, I’ve talked to so many people and told them about my experience. I tell people, ‘If you have something wrong with your body, go to UCI Health.’” ■

Learn more at [ucihealth.org/stopgap-trial](https://ucihealth.org/stopgap-trial) 



Dr. Jay Han, pictured at the current rehabilitation unit in Orange, eagerly awaits the opening a new 52-bed rehabilitation hospital this summer.

## BETWEEN HOSPITAL AND HOME

The new UCI Health rehabilitation hospital will be a bridge to independent living.

WRITTEN BY NANCY BRANDS WARD

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MICHAEL NEVEUX

When UCI Health opens its seventh hospital this summer, the 52-bed facility in Irvine will nearly quadruple the academic health system's capacity to provide critical rehabilitation care to trauma, stroke, burn, brain injury and spinal cord injury patients throughout Orange County and the region.

Dr. Jay Han, who will be its medical director, is practically counting the days until UCI Health — Irvine Rehabilitation hospital opens its doors. The 68,000-square-foot structure, a joint-venture partnership with Lifepoint Rehabilitation, will have brain injury and spinal cord injury units, an independent living suite to practice daily living activities, as well as the latest therapeutic and robot-assisted technologies designed to help patients return to home life.

And in a first for the region, Orange County's only academic rehabilitation hospital will have a dedicated wing for inpatient cancer rehabilitation led by a cancer rehabilitation physician and team specializing in supportive oncology therapies.

For Han and his highly skilled multidisciplinary team,

it can't come too soon. The medical director for UCI Health Rehabilitation Services and chair of the UC Irvine School of Medicine's Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation spoke of the urgent need with *Live Well*.

### **Why are more inpatient rehabilitation beds needed?**

People are living longer and the incidence of chronic disease is rising. After severe illness or traumatic injury, inpatient rehabilitation helps set the stage for optimal recovery.

### **What is a rehabilitation hospital's role?**

Acute care hospitals stabilize patients and save lives. Sometimes when stroke, traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, burn or cancer patients are discharged, they struggle. A rehabilitation hospital offers coordinated inpatient care that is vital for optimal recovery.

### **Why is inpatient rehabilitation important?**

Closely coordinated inpatient rehabilitative care is the most

effective way to improve people's function, to get them back to their lives quickly. It bridges the gap between acute care and home.

### What happens when patients don't get this specialized care?

Typically, their recovery will be protracted and they won't regain as much function to ensure a good quality of life.

### What are some of the new hospital's unique features?

Our goal is to help people recover as much function as possible. We'll have a therapy center with a living room, kitchen, dining room, bedroom and bathroom to give patients practice moving around in a home setting. We'll also have a mock-up of a car for patients to practice getting in and out of and operating a vehicle.

### What other features will help patients with basic functions?

We'll have balance and fall-prevention training plus a communications center with augmented devices and techniques to help patients use computers, telephones and other means of communication.

### Why is there a unit for cancer patient care?

Cancer treatment is far better than it was 10 or 20 years ago. People are cured or living longer with cancer, but they may face limitations. Our multidisciplinary cancer rehabilitation program, which will be the first in Orange County, can help them get back to their lives.

### Will you use robotics and other technologies?

Yes! We'll have the latest therapies and modalities, including electrical stimulation and exercise programs. As an academic institution, we'll also be collaborating with UC Irvine scientists working on stem cell and gene therapies.

### How do rehabilitation patients benefit from academic medical care?

Our team of doctors and healthcare professionals will not only provide leading-edge care, they'll also be conducting research to advance rehabilitative care for patients in our region and beyond. We'll be able to test new technologies and therapies, and our cancer patients will receive rehabilitation therapy and still continue with their clinical trials.

### Is this type of care unique to our region?

Yes, as a stand-alone, academic hospital, we will offer top-line, post-acute rehabilitation care right



Kriech-Higdon Photography

These images of a Lifepoint facility show actors in an activity center and in a simulated car. Recovering patients are able to practice skills they will need to regain their mobility and quality of life when they return home.

here in Orange County, serving our six acute care hospitals. We will become *the* premier center for the region, *the* destination for people in need of state-of-the-art rehabilitative care. ■



Learn more about Rehabilitation Services  
at [ucihealth.org/rehabilitation](https://ucihealth.org/rehabilitation)

# A Life Transformed

A promising cell-therapy trial may give lupus patients a pathway back to health.

WRITTEN BY SAMANTHA BONAR

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MICHAEL NEVEUX

Nursing assistant Kimberly Renihan was a 22-year-old newlywed when a lupus diagnosis flipped her life's script. It explained her crushing fatigue, joint pain and hair loss, but effective treatment was elusive. She gave up her dream of becoming a nurse.

The chronic autoimmune disease, which affects 1.5 million Americans, causes the immune system to attack the body's own tissues. Lupus is nine times more common in women, often striking between ages 15 and 45. It can flare up periodically over the years, and there is no cure.

An unexpected pregnancy a year after her diagnosis in 2006 exacerbated Renihan's disease, which now attacked her kidneys. The UCI Health high-risk maternity team hospitalized her at 24 weeks to manage her symptoms and preserve the pregnancy. Five weeks later, doctors said her son would have a better shot outside the womb. Owen Renihan was born July 1, 2008. At 29 ounces, he was the size of a soda can.

One of the rheumatologists managing her lupus symptoms during the pregnancy was Dr. Sheetal Desai. With her help, Renihan's kidney disease (called lupus nephritis) went into remission a few months after Owen's birth. Desai has remained her steadfast guide through periods of stability and severe flare-ups.

In 2020, lupus launched another brutal attack on her kidneys. Multiple therapies, including low-dose chemotherapy, lost effectiveness over time. Overwhelmed by fatigue and pain, her health declined until she was barely able to function more than four to six hours a day.

At one appointment, Desai pulled out a list of all medications approved for lupus, even those that could be used off-label.

"We checked off every single one I had tried," Renihan says. "There were none left."

That's when Desai told her about a phase 1 clinical trial for an investigational stem-cell therapy called FT819, which has shown promise in preclinical trials for lupus and other autoimmune diseases.

"It's a very new and promising approach that I think it is definitely worth trying," Desai told her.

Unlike traditional lupus treatments that suppress the entire immune system, FT819 is a one-time infusion of bioengineered chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T cells. Created in a lab, the modified cells are designed to seek and eliminate only the B cells driving the disease.

What makes the therapy so promising, Desai says, is that "we're using a highly targeted approach to direct the immune system to clean up shop with the hope of creating an immune reset."

As the first UCI Health trial participant, Renihan in late August underwent a 25-minute infusion of the cell therapy developed by Fate Therapeutics. No longer on other lupus medications, she began noticing subtle changes. About five weeks later, the crushing fatigue lifted. She started exercising, resumed playing piano and tackling everyday activities. Best of all, she could attend her now 17-year-old son's school events.

"I'm picking up my son, going to the store, cooking dinner," she says. "Finally taking my place back at the family table has been so wonderful."

Tests show her kidney function has improved significantly. Now, several months post-infusion, she is hopeful.

"After 20 years, you don't let yourself get too excited — I've been disappointed so many times," says Renihan, now 41.

"But I cannot deny the differences I'm seeing and feeling."

For Desai, witnessing Renihan's transformation after nearly two decades is a moment of profound joy — one she cannot describe without tearing up.

"I was so invested in finding a therapy that would work for her," says Desai, a professor and chief of rheumatology at the UC Irvine School of Medicine.

"The day she got her CAR T infusion, I went home and cried. I was so excited to be able to offer this to her. To see her now living her life to the fullest has been the greatest gift."

Desai is working to identify lupus patients who haven't been helped by conventional therapies for the trial at the UCI Alpha Clinic, one of only five California sites to offer the therapy. Eligible participants in the trial funded by the California Institute of Regenerative Medicine will be monitored for two years to evaluate its long-term safety and efficacy.

For Renihan, each new day brings joys she hadn't dared to imagine, especially quality time with her husband and son, now a high school senior and long-distance runner. They are even planning trips to Japan and Australia.

"For 20 years, your brain tells you, 'I'm sick,'" she says. "It's a hard transition to think I'm healing. It's like being released from prison. You've been living this life for so long, and all of a sudden the doors open and your body says, 'You're free!'" ■

Learn more at [ucihealth.org/lupus-trial](https://ucihealth.org/lupus-trial) 



Kimberly Renihan is once again playing piano, swimming and fully taking part in life and family activities for the first time in nearly two decades.



## UCI HEALTH — IRVINE WELCOMES NEW PATIENTS

UCI Health marked the historic completion of a new hospital in Irvine with a celebratory open house on Nov. 15. UCI Health — Irvine is the centerpiece of a three-building, \$1.3 billion medical complex on Jamboree Road that is bringing university-level healthcare closer to coastal and south Orange County residents. UCI Health — Irvine opened its doors to patients on Dec. 10. [ucihealth.org/uci-health-irvine](http://ucihealth.org/uci-health-irvine)





## HEALTH CLASSES

Our classes can help improve your well-being and prevent disease. Most are free, but some do have fees. Registration is required. Classes are held online via Zoom except where noted.

Visit [ucihealth.org/events](https://ucihealth.org/events) or call 657-282-6357 for more information.

### ADVANCE DIRECTIVES

March 3, April 7, May 5, June 2, July 7 | 12:30-1:15 p.m.

### BREASTFEEDING

March 5, April 2, May 7, June 4, July 2 | 6-9 p.m. Online

March 9, April 20, May 11 | 6-8 p.m.

June 27, July 25 | 10 a.m.-noon

In-person, 11190 Warner Ave, Suite 214, Fountain Valley

### DIABETES OVERVIEW

March 25, April 29, May 27, June 24, July 29 | 3:30-4:30 p.m.

### HEALTHY LIVING SERIES

March 10, 24; April 7, 21; May 5, 19;

June 2, 16, 30 | 3-4 p.m., English;

10-11 a.m., Spanish

Register for English classes at 714-456-7514

Register for Spanish classes at 714-456-3739

### LIVING WELL WITH HEART FAILURE

March 10, May 12, July 14 |

3:30-4:30 p.m.

### NEWBORN CARE

March 12, April 9, May 14, June 11, July 9 | 6-9 p.m. Online

March 23, April 13, May 18, June 8,

July 27 | 5-8 p.m. In-person, 11190

Warner Ave, Suite 214, Fountain Valley



### PRENATAL PELVIC FLOOR WORKSHOP

March 14, May 9, July 11 | 1-2 p.m.

In-person: 200 S. Manchester Ave., Suite 120, Orange

### CHILDBIRTH PREPARATION SERIES

March 4, 11, 18, 25; April 1, 8, 15, 22;

May 6, 13, 20, 27; June 3, 10, 17, 24;

July 8, 15, 22, 29 | 6-8 p.m.

In-person: 11190 Warner Ave, Suite 214, Fountain Valley

### PREPARING FOR SURGERY – MIND, BODY AND SPIRIT

March 2, April 6, May 4, June 1, July 6 |

Noon-1 p.m.

### PLANT-BASED COOKING WORKSHOP

May 6 | Noon-1 p.m.

### STROKE PREVENTION

English: March 25, May 27, July 29 | 4-5 p.m.

Spanish: March 24, May 26, July 28 | 4-5 p.m.

To register, call 866-STROKE-3 (866-787-6533).

### WEIGHT LOSS & BARIATRIC SURGERY

March 17, April 21, May 19, June 16,

July 21 | 6-7 p.m.

## MEDICARE BASICS

Learn about new 2026 Medicare rules, plan changes and UCI Health offerings at one of our free virtual classes.

**March 18, April 15, May 13, June 3 | 5-6:30 p.m.**

Classes, hosted by a UCI Health representative, will cover basic Medicare, Medicare Supplemental, Medicare Advantage PPO and HMO plans. Please register at [ucihealth.org/medicare](https://ucihealth.org/medicare). Registration is required to get the Zoom link.



## EVENTS

UCI Health and UC Irvine are proud to sponsor these free community events on a variety of health topics.

### KIDNEY STONE DAY

#### March 14 | Creating a no-stone zone

UCI Health experts offer the latest information on preventing kidney stones and new treatments from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the UCI Beall Applied Innovation at the Cove, 5270 California Ave., Irvine. Space is limited. To register, contact us at [urologyevents@hs.uci.edu](mailto:urologyevents@hs.uci.edu).

### MEDICINE IN OUR BACKYARD NEWPORT BEACH LIBRARY LECTURES

#### March 23 | Preventing cognitive decline

— Sonia Sehgal, MD

#### April 27 | Managing knee pain: Nonsurgical and surgical treatment options

— Navid Alem, MD, and Ryan Diiovanni, MD

#### May 18 | Spotting stroke: Know the signs, prevent damage

— Jay Shah, MD

Presentations begin at 7 p.m. at the Newport Beach Central Library, 1000 Avocado Ave., Newport Beach. Doors open at 6:30 p.m. A Q&A will follow the doctor's lecture. Visit [nbplf.foundation/programs/medicine-in-our-backyard](http://nbplf.foundation/programs/medicine-in-our-backyard) to register for these free talks.

### UCI HEALTH — FOUNTAIN VALLEY COMMUNITY LECTURES

#### May 14 | Brain attack: Stroke treatment and prevention

— Nirav Patel, MD

The lecture begins at 11 a.m. at the Center at Founders Village Senior & Community Center, 17967 Bushard St., Fountain Valley. Registration is required. Visit [ucihealth.org/events](http://ucihealth.org/events) or call 714-593-4446 for more information.

### UCI HEALTH — PLACENTIA LINDA COMMUNITY LECTURES

#### Feb. 18 | Latest treatment options for hearing loss

— Miriam Smetak, MD  
The presentation begins at 6 p.m. at the Yorba Linda Public Library Community Room, 4852 Lakeview Ave., Yorba Linda. Registration is required. Visit [ucihealth.org/events](http://ucihealth.org/events) or email [phousto@hs.uci.edu](mailto:phousto@hs.uci.edu) for more information.

### GAVIN HERBERT EYE INSTITUTE COMMUNITY LECTURES

#### March 10 | Diabetic eye disease: How it's treated and dietary management

— Mitul Mehta, MD, and Aditi Thakkar, MD

#### April 7 | Age-related macular degeneration: Changes in vision and long-term prevention

— Andrew Browne, MD, PhD, and Stephanie Lu, MD

#### May 5 | Taking the stress out of cataract surgery

— Matthew Wade, MD

#### June 2 | What is dry eye and how is it treated?

— Sanjay Kedhar, MD

Visit [ophthalmology.uci.edu/events](http://ophthalmology.uci.edu/events) to register for these online lectures, which begin at 7 p.m. Email [ghei@uci.edu](mailto:ghei@uci.edu) or call 949-824-7243 to learn more.

### SUE & BILL GROSS STEM CELL RESEARCH CENTER LECTURES

#### March 10 | Timing is everything: Circadian regulation of intestinal stem cells

— Selma Masri, PhD, and Amy Song, graduate student

#### April 7 | How sorting mesenchymal stem cells could improve clinical outcomes

— Tayloria Adams, PhD, and Tia Wilson, PhD candidate

#### May 5 | Stem cell immunotherapies for breast cancer metastasis

— Devon Lawson, PhD, and Tim McMullen, PhD

#### June 2 | Changing paradigms in the treatment of acute lymphoblastic leukemia in adults

— Alex Minella, MD, and Nick Pannunzio, PhD

Presentations begin at 7 p.m. in Gross Hall, 845 Health Sciences Road, Irvine. To receive a link for free parking, please register at <https://tinyurl.com/34f6mncv> or email [SCRCdirector@hs.uci.edu](mailto:SCRCdirector@hs.uci.edu).



## SUPPORT GROUPS

To learn more about our support groups, call or email the contacts listed below or visit [ucihealth.org/events](http://ucihealth.org/events)



### ADVANCED HEART FAILURE & VAD

714-456-7514

### BARIATRIC SUPPORT GROUP

[alisont3@hs.uci.edu](mailto:alisont3@hs.uci.edu)

### BURN SURVIVORS

714-456-7437

### CHRONIC LYMPHOCYTIC LEUKEMIA

[tevans@cllsociety.org](mailto:tevans@cllsociety.org)

### DEMENTIA CAREGIVERS

949-814-4793

### DIABETES SUPPORT GROUP

[ttvo4@hs.uci.edu](mailto:ttvo4@hs.uci.edu)

### FACIAL PAIN ASSOCIATION

[octnafpa@yahoo.com](mailto:octnafpa@yahoo.com)

### KOREAN WOMEN'S CANCER SUPPORT GROUP

714-875-4658

### MASTECTOMY SUPPORT GROUP

949-518-5124 or [vbassili@hs.uci.edu](mailto:vbassili@hs.uci.edu)

### NEW MOTHER SUPPORT GROUP

[ttvo4@hs.uci.edu](mailto:ttvo4@hs.uci.edu)

### OSTOMY ASSOCIATION OF ORANGE COUNTY

714-637-7971

### PANCREATIC CANCER

949-814-4784

### PARKINSON'S DISEASE

[blagasse@hs.uci.edu](mailto:blagasse@hs.uci.edu)

### STEM CELL TRANSPLANT

714-335-8439

### STROKE SUPPORT GROUP

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

### TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY

[traumainjuryprevention@hs.uci.edu](mailto:traumainjuryprevention@hs.uci.edu)

### YOUNG ADULT CANCER

[caps@hs.uci.edu](mailto:caps@hs.uci.edu)



Photo courtesy of Diane O'Dowd

The surf is up again for Diane O'Dowd after successful spinal surgery.

## NO LIMITS

Spine surgery reinvigorates an athletic retiree.

When pain in her lower back and legs became unbearable, Diane O'Dowd turned to UCI Health to find relief. An active 68-year-old emeritus UC Irvine professor of developmental and cell biology, O'Dowd sought out spine surgeon Dr. Nitin Bhatia. He determined she was suffering from a slipped vertebra and a narrowing spinal canal that was pinching the spinal cord and sciatic nerves. Bhatia and his colleagues at the Comprehensive Spine Center routinely perform complex surgeries, even on patients into their 70s. He performed a lumbar decompression to relieve pressure on her spinal nerves as well as a spinal fusion to stabilize the slipping bone. O'Dowd spoke to *Live Well* just after the one-year anniversary of her 2024 surgery.

“I’ve had problems with sciatica since my early 40s. When I learned that physical activity wouldn’t make the problem worse, I exercised extensively and was able to rehab my way out of it. Over the next 25 years, I’d have cycles of bad sciatic pain. But I’m a very active person. Every time it would get worse, I stepped up my exercise and got myself out of it.

By 2023, the sciatica returned. I did physical therapy and had steroid injections, but they didn’t help. I was in so much pain, I lost my appetite. I hardly slept and could barely stand. At my retirement gathering, I had to lean on the furniture. When I finally went to see Dr. Bhatia, he said, “You have two bones smashing into each other and crushing a nerve in between. But I’ve got good news for you. This is a mechanical problem, and we’re excellent at fixing mechanical problems.”

I’ve always been active. Three months before my surgery, I read an article saying that pre-op exercise is as important as post-op exercise, so I doubled down and worked hard to get in great shape. While I could no longer ski, surf or go backpacking, I did daily core and high-intensity workouts and lots of walking.

As soon as I came out of surgery, my searing, shooting pain was gone — just gone. I don’t even remember pain in recovery because it was nowhere near the excruciating pain I had been in for so long.

Now I have no limitations. I can do everything I did before and even added pickleball. Eleven months after my surgery, I did the Pacific Coast Triathlon in Laguna Beach with my son and his fiancée. I swam half a mile, biked 12 miles and ran for 3 miles. My husband and I hiked the Trans-Catalina Trail with 25-pound backpacks. I’m taking two ski trips this winter.

People need to know they can have good outcomes from spine surgery, especially when they prepare themselves physically and see an experienced surgeon like Dr. Bhatia. I’m grateful to the UCI Health Comprehensive Spine Center for allowing me to live life to the fullest in my retirement years.

— Diane O'Dowd



Learn more about spine services at [ucihealth.org/spine](https://ucihealth.org/spine)



# Discover seven floors of possible

At UCI Health — Irvine, technologically advanced surgical suites, along with the brightest minds in medicine, bring the promise of a better healing journey. Breathtaking views of the marshlands from floor-to-ceiling windows soothe the mind and stir the soul, while amenities like smart TVs help you stay entertained and virtually connected to loved ones as you recover.

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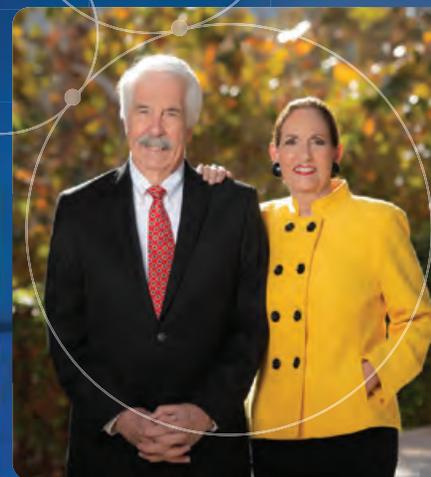
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# Leaving a legacy

Almost any cause that is close to your heart can become a lasting legacy through UC Irvine Planned Giving. Bob Clarke's life was forever changed by two surgeries performed by Dr. Hamid Djalilian. And when he and his wife, Carolyn, learned about Dr. Djalilian's ongoing research and work to solve hearing loss problems for people in developing nations, they decided to support his efforts through an estate gift to UC Irvine.



Find out how you can craft a beautiful legacy. Contact Roland Ho at [roland.ho@uci.edu](mailto:roland.ho@uci.edu) or 949-824-6454.

# UC Irvine Planned Giving