Pat Levitt to lead Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute

Pat Levitt, an esteemed neuroscientist from Vanderbilt University, has joined the Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute at the Keck School of Medicine as director, effective Nov. 1. He also will serve as chair and professor of cell and neurobiology at the Keck School and Provost’s Professor of Neuroscience, Psychiatry, and Pharmacy at the USC School of Pharmacy, effective full-time July 1, 2009.

“Dr. Levitt is a highly influential and productive scholar in the field of basic and translational neuroscience,” said Keck School of Medicine Dean Carmen A. Puliafito. “He is an academic star well-suited for leadership of the Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute.”

Established in 2003, Zilkha serves as part of an initiative to expand the neuroscience effort at USC by bringing together basic and clinical scientists to concentrate on a range of disorders. Scientists reach across boundaries to embrace methods and techniques from other fields of study, identifying new approaches to examine nervous system function so we may all better understand the underlying causes of neurological and psychiatric disorders.

Neuroscience Research at Keck

The recent Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists given to Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute (ZNI) researcher Li Zhang in a White House ceremony in December is the nation’s highest honor for scientists beginning their careers. The award serves as a reminder of the prominence ZNI and its researchers have achieved in such a brief time.

Recognizing the enormous potential of neuroscience research to treat a variety of disorders and diseases, the Keck School established the Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute in 2003 with a generous gift from Los Angeles businessman Selim Zilkha. Since then, ZNI faculty, fellows and graduate students have crossed academic disciplines to study the brain from a range of perspectives, taking neuroscience to new heights.

ZNI researchers are helping to understand and ultimately develop cures for a range of neurological and psychiatric disorders including: Alzheimer’s disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig’s disease),...
Jeannie Chen has served as interim director of the institute since 2005.

As director of Zilkha, Levitt will lead the implementation of a strategic plan to understand the genetic and environmental basis for brain diseases. He will also develop plans to increase philanthropic efforts to enhance research and training, as well as lead recruitment efforts in collaboration with departments in the Keck School of Medicine, the USC School of Pharmacy and the Center for Genomic Psychiatry.

“The provost and the deans of the Keck School of Medicine and School of Pharmacy have created an unusual opportunity for me to play a role in growing what is arguably the most exciting and most challenging biomedical science discipline — neuroscience,” said Levitt. “This takes commitment on the part of the USC administration and tapping into the great resources of the Los Angeles community by engaging them in a meaningful way. It’s up to us to embrace the opportunities.”

At Vanderbilt, Levitt has served as the Annette Schaeffer Eskind Chair and director of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Research on Human Development. He has been a tenured professor in the Department of Pharmacology at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine. The Kennedy Center is a university-wide institute that supports highly interdisciplinary research, diagnosis, treatment and community outreach programs and clinics that focus on developmental influences in behavior, communication, learning and memory.

Named a McKnight Foundation Scholar in 2002, Levitt is also an elected Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He is a member of the Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives and the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. Levitt serves on the editorial boards of the journals *Autism Research*, *Journal of Neurodevelopmental Disorders*, *Disease Models and Mechanisms*, *Biological Psychiatry*, *Cerebral Cortex* and *Neuron*. He was senior editor for the *Journal of Neuroscience* for six years.

Levitt has a long history of distinguished service to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in various advisory capacities. Of particular note, he is a member of the NIMH National Advisory Council, a high profile leadership position indicative of wide respect in the research community. He has published over 200 papers and is currently principal investigator of three NIH R01 grants and two NIH P50 program project grants (project leader). Levitt also has an excellent track record of foundation funding from the Simons Foundation, McKnight Endowment Fund, the Joseph and Esther Klingenstein Foundation, the March of Dimes, and other organizations.

“Through his extensive research experience, Levitt will increase the university’s prominence in the field of developmental neuroscience—particularly in the areas of autism and schizophrenia—by adding innovative research and offering interdisciplinary courses and research opportunities to USC students through Zilkha, Keck School of Medicine and the USC School of Pharmacy,” said Puliafito.

Dr. Levitt received his bachelor’s degree in biology from the University of Chicago in 1975. He received his Ph.D. from the University of California, San Diego, in 1978 and completed an NIH Fellowship in Neuroanatomy at Yale University in 1981.
Faculty take vision for the future of medicine to Beverly Hills

Sharing a new vision for the future of medicine at USC, a distinguished panel of faculty experts from the Keck School dazzled an audience assembled Nov. 17 at the Regent Beverly Wilshire in Beverly Hills.

“There is a reason why we are here in Beverly Hills,” said Carmen A. Puliafito, dean of the Keck School. “It has become very clear that reaching out into the community both west toward Beverly Hills and east toward Pasadena is an important part of our strategy going forward.”

More than 125 friends of the Keck School gathered to hear the panel of speakers moderated by Dean Puliafito.

Five USC physicians and researchers made presentations about innovative advances in their areas of expertise:

- Vaughn A. Starnes, Hastings Distinguished Professor and chair of cardiothoracic surgery: “Innovative Strategies in Cardiovascular Disease”

- Heinz-Josef Lenz, chair of the Gastrointestinal Oncology Program and co-director of the Colorectal Center: “The Conquest of Colon Cancer”

- Mark S. Humayun, professor of ophthalmology, cell and neurobiology, and biomedical engineering at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, the Doheny Eye Institute and the USC Viterbi School of Engineering: “Restoration of Sight to the Blind”

- Francine R. Kaufman, distinguished professor of pediatrics and communications at the Keck School of Medicine and the Annenberg School for Communication: “A Focus on Preventing Childhood Diabetes”

- Martin Pera, professor and founding director of the Eli and Edythe Broad Center for Regenerative Medicine and Stem Cell Research at USC: “Stem Cells and the Future of Medicine”

Puliafito closed the event with thanks for speakers and attendees. “It’s wonderful to have such a great audience for these outstanding speakers,” said Puliafito. “I think you can really sense the excitement surrounding the innovative work that’s going on at the Keck School, Children’s Hospital Los Angeles and our USC University and Norris Cancer Hospitals.”
Neuroscience Research at Keck

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anxiety disorders, autism, bipolar disorders and depression, brain tumors, epilepsy, Huntington’s disease, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson’s disease, retinal degeneration, schizophrenia, spinal cord injury, and stroke.

Recent advances at ZNI include the discovery of commonalities behind some types of neural degeneration by comparing the structural components of proteins. Employing novel brain imaging technologies, ZNI researchers are identifying and mapping the relationships between complex genetic code and neurological disease, with the aim of translating these basic discoveries into early phase clinical testing.

ZNI researchers have been highly successful in securing grants from the National Institutes of Health and other sources, bringing the institute’s current total grants portfolio to more than $53 million. A recent grant of $19 million from the National Institute of Mental Health will fund a groundbreaking effort led by ZNI researchers to study the genetic risks for schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Dean’s Photo Gallery

1 Oct. 22 — Dean Puliafito and his wife, Dr. Janet Pine, with Steven Spielberg at the USC Shoah Foundation Institute’s Ambassadors for Humanity gala dinner.

2 Dec. 13 — Dean Puliafito with USC President Steven B. Sample at the dean’s holiday party held at his home.

3 Dec. 13 — At the dean’s holiday party, Dean Puliafito stands with USC Trustee Harlyne J. Norris and Ronald R. Barnes (left), executive director of the Kenneth T. & Eileen L. Norris Foundation.

4 Dec. 13 — Dr. Edward J. Newton, chair of the Department of Emergency Medicine (left), with Pete Delgado, CEO of LAC+USC Healthcare Network, at the dean’s holiday party.

5 Dec. 13 — At the dean’s holiday party, guests mingle under a clear tent erected for the event.

6 Jan. 14 — Dr. Mark Humayun (left) with Marjorie Pings and Dean Puliafito at a Town & Gown ceremony. Humayun, who is professor of ophthalmology, cell and neurobiology, and biomedical engineering at the Keck School, Doheny Eye Institute, and USC Viterbi School of Engineering, was named the inaugural holder of the Cornelius J. Pings Chair in Biomedical Sciences.