

# BRINGING HEALTHCARE TOGETHER FOR THE INLAND EMPIRE

YEAR IN REVIEW 2024-2025





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

04	MESSAGE FROM THE VICE CHANCELLOR & DEAN
05	BY THE NUMBERS
06	ADVANCEMENT
10	AWARDS
14	EDUCATION
24	RESEARCH
32	CLINICAL
38	COMMUNITY
42	AWARDS AND BOARDS

## OUR MISSION

The mission of the UCR School of Medicine is to improve the health of the people of California and, especially, to serve Inland Southern California by training a diverse workforce of physicians and by developing innovative research and healthcare delivery programs that will improve the health of the medically underserved in the region and become models to be emulated throughout the state and nation.

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# BRINGING HEALTHCARE TOGETHER FOR THE INLAND EMPIRE

The 2024-25 academic year has been one of growth, collaboration, and impact for the UC Riverside School of Medicine and UCR Health. Together with our students, faculty, staff, and community partners, we have worked to expand access to care, train the next generation of physicians, and improve the health of the Inland Empire. From welcoming new students and opening state-of-the-art facilities to celebrating graduates who are committed to serving our region, the 2024-25 academic year reflects the power of working together to build a healthier future.

Highlights included the year-long celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Division of Biomedical Sciences, the growth of the UCR Health clinical enterprise, and the launch of the new Master of Public Health program. These developments not only strengthen the foundation of medical education and clinical care but also directly support our mission to serve the people of Inland Southern California.

This Year-in-Review highlights what is possible when education, healthcare, and community come together. Through research that addresses local health challenges, clinical programs that bring care closer to home, and students who reflect the diversity of the region, the School of Medicine and UCR Health continue to serve as partners in advancing health and well-being across Inland Southern California.



## MESSAGE FROM THE VICE CHANCELLOR AND DEAN



Throughout the 2024-25 academic year, UCR School of Medicine students, faculty, and staff proudly celebrated the school's growing legacy by honoring its foundational roots, deepening our commitment to education, research, and clinical care, and setting the stage for an even brighter future for the people of Inland Southern California.

In July, we officially launched our year-long celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Division of Biomedical Sciences, the foundation of the UCR School of Medicine. Anchored in the theme of "Celebrating the Legend and People of Biomed," this milestone anniversary served as a unique homecoming experience bringing together our cherished alumni, faculty, and staff for a series of special events and activities.

With the arrival of the Class of 2028 in August, we welcomed our twelfth cohort of 87 medical students, along with five new biomedical sciences PhD candidates, extending our mission to train the next generation of physicians and biomedical scientists. Not long after, we officially launched our Master of Public Health program with an inaugural cohort of 15 students. Our Graduate Medical Education program was also bolstered this year with the relaunch of our Family Medicine Residency Program, with eight new residents gaining a new home to hone their clinical skills.

While we continued to pursue our educational mission, this year we also took great strides in extending our research and clinical activities. In 2024, we increased our research capacity by achieving \$19 million in sponsored research expenditures. Additionally, our clinical volume, measured through UCR Health clinics, continued trending upward with 46,916 visits. As we grow our clinical footprint, we were delighted to announce a 10-year, multi-phase expansion plan for UCR Health at a signing ceremony in June. This expansion will not only increase access to primary and specialty care throughout the Inland Empire, but it will also allow us to train more students and achieve our goal of increasing medical school enrollment.

As the academic year ended, we graduated our ninth cohort of medical students, who proudly achieved a 99% placement rate with 76% remaining in the Southern California for residency training. Additionally, our esteemed graduates from our Biomedical Sciences program were honored at UCR's Graduate Division Hooding Ceremony as they attained their PhD and master's degrees.

Within the pages of this 2024-25 Year in Review you will find many stories that highlight how we are embodying the theme of "Bringing Healthcare Together". Approaching my tenth year at UCR, I have so much to be thankful for as I reflect on the successes of the UCR School of Medicine. In collaboration with our talented faculty, staff, and students we have worked diligently to advance our mission as we continue striving to improve the health of the Inland Southern California community. Looking ahead to the upcoming year, I remain confident and excited about what is in store for us in the very near future!



Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, Vice Chancellor  
for Health Sciences and Mark and Pam Rubin Dean

# UCR SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

## BY THE NUMBERS

### BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES

**32** PhD students/candidates

**40** MS students

**70** Total affiliated faculty from across UCR

### FACULTY & STAFF

**391** Clinical faculty

**1,367** Community-based faculty

**26** Biomedical Sciences faculty

### GRADUATE MEDICAL EDUCATION

**86** Residents

**34** Fellows

### MEDICAL STUDENTS

**41%** First in family to complete college

**53%** Underrepresented in medicine

**80%** Ties to the Inland Empire

**43%** From disadvantaged backgrounds

Percentage based on 87 matriculated students

### ENROLLMENT

**377** Total MD students

### PATHWAY PROGRAMS

**2,654** Pre-med students reached by Pathways (including K-12 students)

**173** Matriculated at the UCR School of Medicine

### UCR HEALTH CLINICAL CARE

**13,089** Patients treated (excluding hospital patients)

**46,733** Clinical visits

### TRAINING SITES

**115** LACE sites

**78** Clerkship sites

### EXTRAMURAL FUNDING

**\$5.3M**  
Philanthropic gifts

All numbers presented are as of the end of the 2024-2025 academic year.



# ADVANCEMENT

# CELEBRATION OF MEDICAL EDUCATION GALA FETES DIVISION OF BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES

For the second consecutive year, a sold-out crowd of 370 guests attended the Celebration of Medical Education Gala in support of the SOM's Mission Award Scholarship. The scholarship covers the tuition and fees of students in exchange for them committing to practice medicine in the underserved Inland Southern California region.

This year's gala also commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Division of Biomedical Sciences, which was founded in 1974. Faculty from the division formed the academic core of the former UCR/UCLA Program in Biomedical Sciences.

Monica Carson, PhD, chair of the division and master of ceremonies, thanked attendees for their continued support of medical education.

"It is gratifying to have so many alumni, friends, colleagues, and students here with us tonight as we celebrate what a difference your support of our medical students and biomedical scientists means to the future of our community," she said.

For the first time, the gala featured a presenting sponsor: Mrs. Linda Paramo, who honored her children, Sharell and Aaron Paramo. Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, vice chancellor for health sciences and the Mark and Pam Rubin Dean of the School of Medicine, recognized the Paramo family's contribution during her remarks.

Mission Award recipient William Wang, class of 2028, shared his experience growing up in a low-income immigrant household in Loma Linda and watching his older brother struggle with addiction.

"These experiences have shaped me into the person I am today, a person who wants to go into medicine to prevent my own experiences from happening to as many other people as possible," Wang said. "In addition to helping me, the Mission Scholarship will allow my classmates like those who are here tonight to become impactful and compassionate physicians who will practice in the Inland Empire."



# CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES

While returning to UC Riverside to serve as the keynote speaker for the 2024 graduation ceremony, UCR alumnus Peter Igarashi, MD, paused to reflect on his experiences as a student in the Division of Biomedical Sciences at UCR, which celebrated its 50th anniversary this year.

Igarashi, who grew up in Southern California with a physicist father and social security claims representative mother, was drawn to medicine as a field that combined science and service. He joined the first class of medical students in the UCR/UCLA Program in Biomedical Sciences in 1974.

"I know that there was a desire among all the faculty, even back in the 1970s and 80s, to eventually create a four-year medical school at UC Riverside," Igarashi said. "I think all of us who were involved early on in the program were delighted to see that happen."

The UCR School of Medicine, which celebrated its own 10-year anniversary in 2023, is just one accomplishment that's come from Biomedical Sciences over the last five decades. "When we look at this anniversary of Biomedical Sciences, we're looking at the vision of the folks more than 50 years ago about commencing this route that led to this School of Medicine, that led to this mission of focusing on serving our community," said Monica Carson, PhD, chair of the Division of Biomedical Sciences and the S. Sue Johnson Presidential Endowed Chair in Glial-Neuronal Interactions. "The 50-year point is to recognize where we've been, where we are now, and where we're going to go."



# EVENTS AT UC RIVERSIDE SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

The year-long anniversary celebration featured a variety of campus events such as panels, health and wellness presentations, the Grand Rounds series, a symposium, and more that brought together alumni along with past and current faculty and staff.

The anniversary celebration culminated in the 50th Anniversary Symposium in May, which included scientific presentations and panel discussions. It also featured presentations from Biomedical Sciences alumni who shared photos and stories from their time at the school along with their recent research, such as Christine Dauphine, MD, director of the Breast Clinic in the Division of Surgical Oncology at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, who presented “A Research Journey to Examine Health Disparities in Breast Cancer Care.”

Edna Yohannes, executive director of development at the SOM, noted the commitment many alumni retained to the SOM’s mission of serving the underserved. “They’re involved in different threads of the medical field, but they still had one thing in common in terms of service, excellence, commitment, and passion for their work,” she said. Yohannes urged all alumni to engage with the SOM to continue to shape its future by attending events, presenting their research, and mentoring current students.

While the official 50th anniversary celebration has come to an end, Carson also encouraged alumni and others associated with the department to continue sharing their stories and memories of the school to preserve for the future. “Everyone here are legends as we go into our next 50 years,” she said.





# AWARDS

## BAJWA HONORED BY CAFP AS FAMILY PHYSICIAN OF THE YEAR

Associate Clinical Professor for Health Sciences Moazzum Bajwa, MD, MPH, was named the California Academy of Family Physicians 2024 Family Physician of the Year.

Bajwa is the director of the school's Longitudinal Ambulatory Care Experience (LACE) and sees patients at the Riverside University Health System (RUHS). He was honored at the annual CAFP Family Medicine Prism of Practice Conference on August 23-25, 2024 at the Hilton Orange County in Costa Mesa.

The award recognizes a family physician "who represents the finest characteristics of the specialty."

"This is a total team recognition: I wouldn't have the opportunity to work with my amazing patients, colleagues, and students without the support from UCR and RUHS," Bajwa said.



## REIMANN RECEIVES DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD FROM AAMC



Linda Reimann, the retired assistant dean for Strategic Initiatives and chief of staff, received the Distinguished Service Award from the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) Group on Institutional Planning (GIP).

The award recognizes the contributions of members of the GIP who, by virtue of their effort and service, have contributed significantly to the advancement of the mission of the GIP over the course of their career.

"I am deeply honored to receive this recognition from my peers for my service to the Group on Institutional Planning," Reimann said. "For over 25 years, the GIP has been more than just a professional community; it has been a source of knowledge, lasting friendships, and significant personal and professional growth. I have always been profoundly grateful for any opportunity to give back to a group that has given me so much."

Reimann served for several years on the GIP Steering Committee and held the position of national chairperson in 2014-15. She also contributed to multiple subcommittees and has presented on various aspects of strategic planning in academic medicine at AAMC webinars, conferences, and professional development sessions.

Reimann received the award at the annual Group on Business Affairs (GBA) and Group on Institutional Planning (GIP) Joint Spring Meeting on April 23-25, 2025 in Phoenix, AZ.

# UCR SOM RANKED SEVENTH FOR DIVERSITY IN US NEWS AND WORLD ANNUAL REPORT

The UCR School of Medicine was ranked seventh in diversity in the US News and World Report's annual Best Medical Schools rankings that were released on July 23, 2024.

UCR SOM tied with the University of New Mexico and was second among University of California medical schools, behind UC Davis (tied for 4th) and ahead of UC San Francisco (11th) and UCLA Geffen School of Medicine (12th). The top three schools were the Morehouse School of Medicine, Meharry Medical College, and Howard University, all historically black colleges and universities (HBCU). UCR SOM's ranking fell slightly, from fifth last year, as Meharry and Morehouse returned to the list after being absent since 2021.

The US News and World Report diversity rankings methodology compares the diversity of medical school classes with the demographic diversity of their respective states. In 2023, UCR enrolled 40.44% of students from underrepresented minority groups.

"This recognition reflects our ongoing effort to fulfill our mission to train a diverse physician workforce and provide equitable health care to the people of the Inland Empire," said Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, vice chancellor for health sciences and the Mark and Pam Rubin Dean of the School of Medicine. "I often talk about how our students, staff and faculty can go far together when we embrace inclusion, excellence and diversity. This list is an example of multiple institutions doing just that, working together to improve access and diversity in healthcare and medicine."

**"THIS RECOGNITION REFLECTS OUR ONGOING EFFORT TO FULFILL OUR MISSION TO TRAIN A DIVERSE PHYSICIAN WORKFORCE AND PROVIDE EQUITABLE HEALTH CARE TO THE PEOPLE OF THE INLAND EMPIRE."**

— **Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, vice chancellor for health sciences and the Mark and Pam Rubin Dean of the School of Medicine**





## NEW SCHOOL OF MEDICINE BUILDING WINS DESIGN/CONSTRUCTION AWARDS

The School of Medicine Education Building II, which opened in September 2023, received the Award of Merit in the Excellence in Sustainability category and an Award of Merit in Higher Education/Research from Engineering News-Record California, a construction industry trade publication.

The five-story building is the medical school's largest expansion since it opened in 2013 and the first building designed specifically for its needs, with state-of-the-art facilities that support modern medical education. It allows for increased class size and features administrative offices, lecture halls, classrooms, study space, student lounges, and other support space. The building has a 200-kilowatt solar array on the roof and is LEED Platinum-certified, meeting leading industry standards for energy efficiency and sustainability.

"We are incredibly proud of this achievement," said Cynthia Carolina, director of facilities and operations for the school. "The School of Medicine Education Building II is more than just a building; it's a testament to our dedication to providing our students with the best possible learning environment while prioritizing sustainability."



# EDUCATION

# INAUGURAL MASTERS OF PUBLIC HEALTH PROGRAM BEGINS WITH CLASS OF 15 STUDENTS

In early September, the inaugural cohort of students in the UCR School of Medicine's Masters of Public Health (MPH) program started their two-year journey towards their degree. The program, which was the brainchild of Mario Sims, PhD, distinguished professor and faculty director, brought together 15 students. Of these, 80% are residents of Inland Southern California, 40% are graduates of UCR, and 67% are first-generation college students.

"There's an interest to understand health equity here in the Inland Southern California region, but there's not been a driving program for research and teaching that's been a part of this region like there needs to be," Sims said.

"Hopefully this will produce practitioners who are sensitive to the role of community in formulating strategies for improving health and achieving health equity, through coursework, through research efforts, through teaching and through training a generation of scholars who may be members of the communities but who will also engage our community in efforts to improve health," he added.

"I'm looking forward to tackling topics that might be uncomfortable for some people and discouraged in other places," said incoming MPH student Nina Ruedas, LMFT, the director of the Women's Resource Center and a longtime sexual health educator who works with LGBTQ+ populations. "I'm going to build a vocabulary and an understanding that can help me... teach others about these topics in new and improved ways."

SOM faculty and staff expressed as much excitement about the incoming class as the new MPH students did about the program.

"Meeting this amazing group of students at orientation at the end of August was very gratifying for all of the faculty and staff who helped build the program over the past few years," said Mark Wolfson, PhD, chair of SMPPH. "The UCR MPH program has been a long time coming," he continued. "It is an honor to support the education and professional development of the next generation of public health leaders."

Each member of the inaugural class received the SOM Dean's MPH Scholarship to help offset the cost of their education.



# WHITE COAT CEREMONY WELCOMES 87 INTO THE CLASS OF 2028

The UCR School of Medicine's 2024 White Coat Ceremony, held on August 9, welcomed 87 new medical students and five PhD candidates in biomedical sciences. Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, the vice chancellor for health sciences and the Mark and Pam Rubin Dean of the School of Medicine, welcomed the class of 2028 before extending a special welcome to their family and friends in the audience. "While this evening is devoted to recognizing our medical and biomedical sciences students who are entering the first chapter of their lives as future physicians and researchers, we also celebrate what you have done, and will continue to do, to support them throughout their journey in medical and graduate school," she said.



Moazzum Bajwa, MD, director of the Longitudinal Ambulatory Care Experience (LACE) program and associate clinical professor for health sciences at the SOM, presented the keynote speech. Bajwa described the quiet rage he developed during his years as a physician from witnessing health and income disparities in the community. "My sincere hope is that you chose UCR because you recognize that injustice and you want to do something about it," he said.

Bajwa urged the class of 2028 to turn their own anger into collective action. "This is the part where I'm supposed to ask you to close your eyes and imagine where you will be in 10 years--but we can't wait that long for you to share your brilliance with our community," he said. "Your patients cannot wait."

"Transform that anger into action," Bawja continued. "It will make every day of studying a labor of love."

Over half (63%) of the class of 2028 grew up in a medically underserved region and around one-third speaks English as a second language. Just under 40% were first-generation college students, and 80% have ties to the Inland Empire, mirroring the population the SOM aims to serve.





## MATCH DAY 2025: UCR SOM STUDENTS TAKE THE NEXT STEP IN MEDICAL JOURNEY

On Friday, March 21, 73 UCR School of Medicine students joined their fellow fourth-year students from across the country in learning where they would be conducting their residencies at Match Day 2025.

The celebration was held at the Marinaj Banquet and Events Center in Moreno Valley. Seventy-six percent of the students will remain in Southern California for their residency programs, with 37% in the Inland Empire. In addition, 33% of the students will enter primary care specialties that are highly needed in the region, specifically family medicine, internal medicine, and pediatrics.

Among those staying local is Omar Escovedo-Leyva, who matched into urology at Loma Linda University. He was inspired to pursue medicine after watching his father struggle to access care due to a lack of Spanish-speaking physicians. "I thought I could make a pretty big impact, specifically here in the Inland Empire," he said.

Cloie Chiong, who matched into family medicine at UC Irvine, also hopes to serve the region long term. "I really got to understand the primary care deficit we have here," said Chiong, who is from Redlands, CA. "Being able to interact with our communities and being part of that community really motivated me to want to give back."

Associate Dean for Career Advising Hanh Nguyen, MD, reminded students to stay connected to their purpose. "On your most trying days, or nights when you are on call, reread your personal statement and never forget why you are doing what you are doing," he said. "Remember, you belong there, wherever that 'there' is."





## UCR SOM CELEBRATES COMMENCEMENT 2025

The UCR School of Medicine celebrated the graduation of 74 students in the class of 2025 at its annual Commencement and Hippocratic Oath Ceremony on Friday, June 6, 2025.

Vice Chancellor for Health Sciences and Mark and Pam Rubin Dean Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, opened the ceremony with a tribute to the students' resilience, acknowledging the unique journey of the class that began medical school during the COVID-19 pandemic. "You have pushed yourselves to your limits, advocated for your patients, and grown as individuals and future physicians," she said.

Seventy-six percent of the graduates will remain in Southern California for residency training, with 37% staying in the Inland Empire. Sixty-six percent are entering primary care and high-need specialties such as family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, psychiatry, and general surgery, furthering the SOM's mission.

The keynote speaker was Xavier Becerra, the 25th United States Secretary of Health and Human Services. "You are the future of medicine and of public-health. The health of our families, our nation, our economy, of the world, literally rests on your shoulders," he told the graduates. "No pressure."

Student speaker Xaida Wright, who grew up in nearby Rancho Cucamonga and served as a class representative during medical school, encouraged her classmates to remain grounded in their purpose. "If we keep our 'why medicine' as our center point, it will allow us to make the best decisions both for ourselves and for our patients," Wright said.

Many graduates' "why" involved giving back to the Inland Empire community, reflecting the school's mission to improve access to healthcare in the surrounding area.

Graduating student Danae Bowen said she plans to return to the Inland Empire as a recipient of the IEHP Dean's Mission Award, which involves a commitment to practice in Inland Southern California. "I feel like what drew me to UCR...was the mission about bringing more physicians to areas of need," said Bowen, who will be completing her residency in obstetrics and gynecology at UC Davis. "I just felt like I want to put myself in a position where I can help where it's needed, where people really have a shortage of doctors," she said.



“IF WE KEEP OUR ‘WHY MEDICINE’ AS OUR CENTER POINT, IT WILL ALLOW US TO MAKE THE BEST DECISIONS BOTH FOR OURSELVES AND FOR OUR PATIENTS.”

- Xaida Wright, Class of 2025 pictured below



## Osei Appointed Associate Dean for Medical Education Quality and Compliance



Adwoa Osei, MD, FAAP, was named associate dean of the Office of Medical Education Quality and Compliance at the UCR School of Medicine. Her appointment began on July 1, 2025.

In her new role, Osei directs the Office of Medical Education Quality and Compliance and is responsible for the continuous quality improvement process of the medical education program. She will also lead key aspects of the accreditation process with the Liaison Committee on Medical Education.

Osei is a health science associate professor of pediatrics with more than 20 years of clinical experience. She joined the UCR SOM faculty and UCR Health in 2018. She is the founding program director for the School of Medicine's Program in Medical Education - African, Black and Caribbean (PRIME-ABC). Since 2019 she has served as the founding director of the pediatric clerkship at the UCR SOM, and since 2020 she has directed the school's Health Equity, Social Justice, and Anti-Racism curriculum.

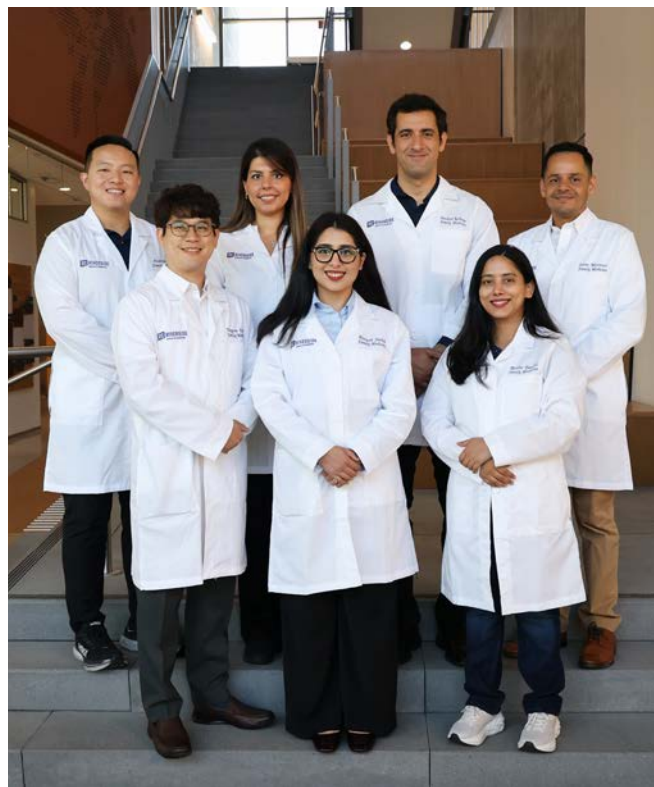
"I am deeply honored and excited to step into this position," Osei said. "I look forward to collaborating with colleagues and students in service to our community and to continuing our growth and sustaining the highest standards for medical education excellence at UCR School of Medicine."

## Family Medicine GME Program Welcomes Cohort of Eight Students

Under the leadership of Department of Family Medicine Chair Michelle Bholat, MD, MPH, the UCR School of Medicine welcomed a new cohort of eight students into the relaunched Family Medicine Residency Program in 2025.

Dignity Health St. Bernardine Medical Center is the program's primary participating site, with additional rotations at UCR Health, the Riverside University Health System, Bear Valley Hospital, and the UCLA Santa Monica Medical Center.

The goal of the residency program is to provide outstanding training for Family Medicine residents where they will develop clinical skills enabling them to confidently provide excellent patient care. They will also grow compassion and gain leadership experience, which will empower them to become health advocates within the community and role models to future physicians.



# BHOLAT NAMED CHAIR OF DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY MEDICINE AT UCR SCHOOL OF MEDICINE



The UCR School of Medicine named Michelle Bholat, MD, MPH, as the new chair of the Department of Family Medicine. She began the position on November 15, 2024.

Bholat comes to the UCR SOM from the UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine, where she has had a long,

distinguished career. She most recently served as the executive vice chair for clinical affairs in the Department of Family Medicine and vice chair of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI). She is the co-founder and executive director of the UCLA International Medical Graduate Program and has served to create or expand several ACGME programs in family medicine and addiction medicine. From 2014 to 2021, she was the executive vice chair of the UCLA Department of Family Medicine. Bholat has also served as a public health commissioner to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, fourth district. She was a member of the Joint Commission's Bureau of Primary Health Care. She

is an elected official of the Beach Cities Health District, a community-based organization focused on preventive health. She is a two-time appointee to the Medical Board of California, including a 2022 appointment by Governor Gavin Newsom.

Additionally, she has served as site director and principal investigator for grants focused on expanding a diverse workforce, addressing chronic conditions as well as clinical trials related to substance abuse; she is board eligible in Addiction Medicine. Finally, she is a former fellow of the National Hispanic Medical Association (NHMA) and active member of NHMA's California chapter.

Bholat graduated with her MD degree from the UC Irvine School of Medicine and completed her residency at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center. She added a master of public health degree from UCLA in health policy and management. She is a member of the American Academy of Family Physicians, the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology, the Society of Hospital Medicine, and the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine.

# NGUYEN NAMED ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR CAREER ADVISING



Hanh Nguyen, MD, was appointed as the associate dean for career advising at the UCR School of Medicine, beginning Oct. 1, 2024. His position also includes a faculty appointment as clinical professor in the Department of Family Medicine.

"He is passionate about the mentorship of residents and medical students, and has received multiple awards for his teaching. With his extensive experience in mentoring and student advising, he is well-positioned to support the career development of our medical students," said Vice Chancellor for Health Sciences and the Mark and Pam Rubin Dean Deborah Deas, MD, MPH.

"It is an incredible honor to serve as the associate dean of career advising at the UCR School of Medicine," Nguyen said. "I was raised in an underserved community and took care of patients and their families that I grew up with. Having been a part of the UC system for over

15 years and the UCR family since 2018, the School of Medicine's mission resonates deeply within me. I am so thrilled to have the privilege to guide and support our medical students here at UC Riverside to reach their dreams and goals."

He earned his bachelor of science degree from Creighton University and completed his medical education at the Medical College of Virginia – Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine, followed by a residency at UC Irvine Medical Center where he also served as chief resident.

# UCR SOM HOSTS 41ST ANNUAL LMSA WEST REGIONAL CONFERENCE

The 41st annual Latino Medical Student Association West (LMSA) Regional Conference was hosted for the first time at the UC Riverside School of Medicine in early February 2025.

About 700 people attended the conference, which served as an opportunity for undergraduate and medical students alike to hear from guest speakers and gain insight on what it means to be successful in medicine. The theme of the conference, “Cultivando Comunidad” (cultivating community), aimed to inspire attendees to plant seeds of justice in healthcare to shape a growing community of physicians, advocates, and leaders.

“This year’s theme is more than a statement; it is a call to action to commit ourselves to stand in solidarity with our communities, fighting for equity and ensuring that healthcare serves as a tool for justice rather than oppression,” said LMSA West co-director and UCR SOM medical student Samantha Garcia, one of the opening speakers. “Together, we will ensure that these seeds grow into a future where our communities receive the care, dignity, and representation they deserve.”

The conference included more than 40 workshops on a variety of topics led by diverse medical students and featured keynote speaker David Acosta, MD, chief diversity and inclusion officer at the Association of American Medical Colleges. Acosta’s speech highlighted the importance of representation and diversity in healthcare, since many patients seek physicians who have similar backgrounds and speak the same language.

“You are the future, you are hope, and we will overcome this,” said Acosta, referring to the struggles of Latinos in healthcare as well as the recent political movement against diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. “We’ve been here before,” he added.

The conference concluded with an awards ceremony for students and faculty, followed by a speech by Margarita Loeza, MD, MPH, the assistant dean of student affairs and admissions at the College of Medicine at Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science.







# RESEARCH



# DR. PEGAN GOES TO WASHINGTON

## BIOMEDICAL SCIENTIST LEADS RESEARCHERS ON TRIP TO ALERT MEMBERS OF CONGRESS ABOUT THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF FUNDING CUTS

In March 2025, Scott D. Pegan, PhD, associate dean of Pre-Clerkship Medical Education at the UCR School of Medicine and a US Army reserve lieutenant colonel, led a group of researchers and others to, DC to alert members of Congress and their staff about the negative impacts of cuts to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) research funding and of federal communications restrictions.

“Members of Congress and their staff do a lot of research, but sometimes they miss some of the real impact that it will have on their constituencies,” Pegan said of his visit, which included meetings with Sen. Adam B. Schiff, Sen. Mike Collins, Rep. Mark Takano, Rep. Norma Torres, Rep. Jay Obernolte, Rep. Gilvert Cisneros, and 11 other representatives.

Pegan said several potential consequences resonated with Congress members, including the potential for scientists to leave the U.S. for China and other nations, taking future discoveries with them. “That really puts us on a trajectory that within the next few years, if there was a need for a new medical countermeasure... that technology would no longer be controlled or produced by the United States,” he added. “That message was received very well across all members that we talked to.”

NIH funding cuts significantly impact a variety of research at universities that both safeguards and promotes public health and national security. It also has a significant impact on things like national defense, as the armed forces rely on technology generated by this research.

Some of the specific projects at the UCR School of Medicine that the cuts impacted include: tracking virus development and developing treatments for viruses that endanger U.S. troops and public health conditions including autism, inflammatory bowel disease, concussions, and Alzheimer’s disease.

Pegan called the trip a success and said he was able to bring awareness to the downstream aspects of reduced funding support from the federal government.

“Our elected officials really strive to make our lives better, but sometimes changes that look good on paper don’t really pan out that well,” Pegan said, adding that the cuts may seem minor but would have three to four times the anticipated losses, inhibiting research that supports public health and security. “Most congressional members are very happy to discuss with their constituents and the public about these kinds of issues so that they can be better informed and guide their policies.”



# PROTEIN DEGRADATION STRATEGY OFFERS HOPE IN CANCER THERAPY

A University of California, Riverside team of scientists led by Professor of Biomedical Sciences and Daniel Hays Chair in Cancer Research Maurizio Pellecchia, PhD, has used a novel approach to identify protein degraders that target Pin1, a protein involved in pancreatic cancer development.

The paper, titled “Targeted Degradation of Pin1 by Protein Destabilizing Compounds” that appears in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, reports that the team has designed agents that not only bind tightly to Pin1 but are designed to cause its destabilization and cellular degradation — a finding that could pave the way for new cancer therapies.

The team found that the degraders, which were made in the lab, act like “molecular crowbars” that open up the structure of Pin1, rendering it less stable.

“Pancreatic cancer is particularly difficult to treat because a highly fibrous tissue covers pancreatic cancer cells,” Pellecchia said. “As a result, it is difficult for treatments to reach the pancreatic cancer cells effectively. We want to understand the crosstalk between cancer-associated fibroblasts and pancreatic cancer cells. We believe Pin1 may play a major role in this crosstalk.”

Pin1 is a fast-acting enzyme involved in many cellular processes and implicated in the formation of tumors. It is overexpressed in many tumors and its deficiency significantly suppresses cancer progression. Its expression level is much higher in cancer-associated fibroblasts and in pancreatic cancer cells.



Cartoon illustrates the research. (UCR/Isaac Rodriguez)

## MOUSE STUDY FINDS FATHERS ON UNHEALTHY DIETS CAN CAUSE CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE IN THEIR DAUGHTERS



Males who have an unhealthy, high-cholesterol diet can cause increased risk of cardiovascular disease, or CVD, in their daughters, a University of California, Riverside-led mouse study has found.

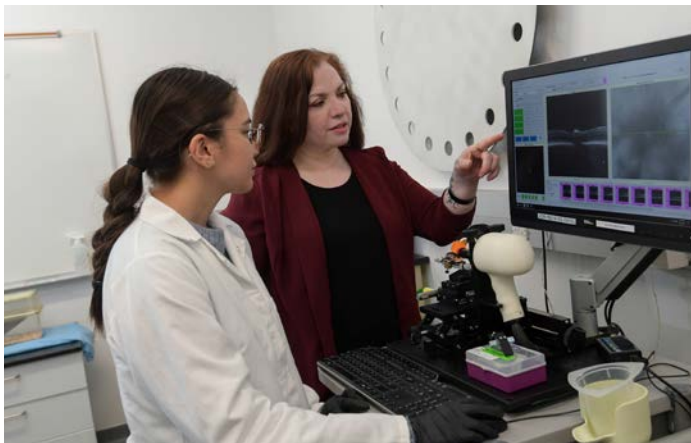
The research, published in the journal JCI Insight in September 2024, is the first to demonstrate this result seen only in female offspring.

“It had been previously thought that sperm contribute only their genome during fertilization,” said the study’s lead author and Professor of Biomedical Sciences Changcheng Zhou, PhD. “However, recent studies by us and others have demonstrated that environmental exposures, including unhealthy diet, environmental toxicants, and stress, can alter the RNA in sperm to mediate intergenerational inheritance.”

Ribonucleic acid, or RNA, is present in all living cells. Bearing structural similarities to DNA, this nucleic acid is essential for most biological functions in living organisms and viruses.

“Men who plan to have children should consider eating a healthy, low-cholesterol diet and reducing their own CVD risk factors,” Zhou said. “These factors appear to affect their sperm in influencing the health of their female offspring. Our study suggests the sperm passes this information to the next generation.”

## CONNECTION FOUND BETWEEN MITOCHONDRIA AND MS BRAIN DAMAGE



A study published in June 2025 in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences sheds light on the underlying mechanisms of cerebellar degeneration in multiple sclerosis (MS), suggesting that mitochondrial dysfunction may play a key role in the progressive loss of neuronal cells called Purkinje cells and worsening motor impairments.

MS, which affects about 2.3 million people worldwide, is marked by chronic inflammation and demyelination in the central nervous system.

“Our study, conducted by my graduate student Kelley Atkinson, proposes that inflammation and demyelination in the cerebellum disrupt mitochondrial function, contributing to nerve damage and Purkinje cell loss,” said Seema Tiwari-Woodruff, a professor of biomedical sciences who led the research team. “We observed a significant loss of the mitochondrial protein COXIV in demyelinated Purkinje cells, suggesting that mitochondrial impairment contributes directly to cell death and cerebellar damage.”

Next, the team will investigate whether the mitochondrial impairment found in Purkinje cells also affects other brain cells like oligodendrocytes, which help form white matter, or astrocytes, which support overall brain function.

“To answer this, one of our ongoing research projects is focused on studying mitochondria in specific types of brain cells in the cerebellum,” Tiwari-Woodruff said. “Such research can open the door to finding ways to protect the brain early on — like boosting energy in brain cells, helping them repair their protective myelin coating, or calming the immune system before too much damage is done. This is especially important for people with MS who struggle with balance and coordination, as these symptoms are tied to damage in the cerebellum.”

## GENETIC LINK FOUND BETWEEN IRON DEFICIENCY AND CROHN’S DISEASE

A study led by Professor of Biomedical Sciences Declan McCole, PhD, shows how a genetic mutation associated with Crohn’s disease can worsen iron deficiency and anemia — one of the most common complications experienced by patients with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).

IBD is a group of chronic inflammatory disorders that includes Crohn’s disease and ulcerative colitis. Iron deficiency anemia is the most prevalent of these effects, contributing to chronic fatigue and reduced quality of life, particularly during disease flare-ups.

“This discovery sheds light on a critical mechanism that links a patient’s genetics to their ability to absorb and regulate iron, which is essential for maintaining healthy blood and energy levels,” McCole said. “Our findings offer an explanation for why some IBD patients remain iron-deficient despite oral supplementation.”

“The only way the body can obtain iron is through intestinal absorption from food, making this discovery particularly significant,” said first author Hillmin Lei, a doctoral student in McCole’s lab. “Disruption of this pathway by genetic variants like those in PTPN2 could help explain why some IBD patients fail to respond to oral iron therapy, a commonly prescribed treatment for anemia.”

The study, titled “PTPN2 Regulates Iron Handling Protein Expression in Inflammatory Bowel Disease Patients and Prevents Iron Deficiency in Mice” was published in February 2025 in the International Journal of Molecular Sciences.



# GENETIC MUTATION LINKED TO HIGHER COVID-19 RISK

A research study has provided new insight as to how the virus that spreads COVID-19 invades human cells and a deeper understanding of how genetic factors can influence susceptibility to the illness.

A team led by Professor of Biomedical Sciences Declan McCole, PhD, found that a loss-of-function variant in the phosphatase gene PTPN2 can increase expression of the SARS-CoV-2 receptor ACE2, making cells more susceptible to viral invasion.

The loss-of-function variant is a genetic modification commonly associated with autoimmune diseases that disrupts the normal function of a protein, inactivating or severely impairing it. ACE2, a protein on the surface of many cell types, acts as the receptor for the SARS-CoV-2 virus and allows it to infect cells.

“Our findings suggest that individuals with reduced PTPN2 activity may face a higher risk of infection,” said McCole. “PTPN2, which is expressed in cells throughout the body, normally removes a phosphate from other proteins and enzymes, thus reducing their activity. It acts as a brake. If you have a loss of function in PTPN2, then the brake isn’t working well, and you get more inflammatory signaling.”

The research paper, titled “Tofacitinib Mitigates the Increased SARS-CoV-2 Infection Susceptibility Caused by an IBD Risk Variant in the PTPN2 Gene,” was published in *Cellular and Molecular Gastroenterology and Hepatology* in early 2025.

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## STUDY OFFERS A FRAMEWORK FOR CULTURALLY ADAPTED OBESITY PREVENTION FOR LATINO FAMILIES

A study spearheaded by medical anthropologist Ann Cheney, PhD, has adapted an intervention for childhood obesity prevention to better serve Latina mothers, non-maternal caregivers, and families of low-income backgrounds in Inland Southern California.

Cheney’s team adapted an Australian-developed intervention known as Healthy Beginnings that addressed infant feeding practices to meet the unique needs of Latina mothers and their trusted caregivers. By incorporating the feedback of mothers and caregivers, the researchers identified key cultural meanings and family dynamics to shape the intervention’s delivery.

“We knew for this intervention to be effective, it had to align with the cultural values and lived experiences of the families it aimed to serve,” said Cheney, an associate professor in the Department of Social Medicine, Population, and Public Health. “Latina mothers and other senior women like grandmothers are central to the health and well-being of their families. We therefore needed to ensure that the intervention’s design reflected their beliefs, practices, and the social and emotional context of their lives. Our study shows that culturally sensitive approaches are crucial for fostering trust, engagement, and sustainable health behaviors.”

The research paper, which appeared in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* in the spring of 2025, is titled “Adapting an evidence-based infant nutrition program to promote healthy growth and development in Latinx families of low income.”

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## BRAIN CHANGES LINKED TO OBESITY RESULT IN LOW SPERM COUNT

Using mice fed a high-fat diet to mimic human obesity, a research team led by Professor of Biomedical Sciences Djurdjica Coss, PhD, found that obesity causes chronic changes in the brain. The team found the brains of the mice showed a reduction in the connections between neurons and a downregulation — a reduction in the number — of receptors that normally inform the brain that enough energy is available and to cease food intake.

“This may explain why we don’t stop excessive calorie intake,” Coss said. “The overweight mice also showed lower testosterone in their blood and reduced sperm numbers.” Coss explained that reproductive function is regulated by the hypothalamus-pituitary-gonadal axis, a feedback loop that controls sexual reproduction and development. The hypothalamus is a complex area in the brain that manages food intake, temperature, thirst, and reproduction. It contains neurons that regulate the synthesis and secretion of hormones from the pituitary gland located in the base of the brain, which then regulate testosterone synthesis and sperm production in the testes in males (and estrogen production and ovulation in females).



## STUDY ON HOW TOXOPLASMA GONDII MANIPULATES BRAIN CELLS LAYS GROUNDWORK FOR FUTURE CLINICAL RESEARCH AND THERAPIES

Professor of Biomedical Sciences Emma Wilson, PhD, and a team of researchers explains in a paper published in PLoS Pathogens how the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii* can significantly disrupt brain function, even when it infects only a small number of neurons.

Approximately 10–30% of people in the United States are infected with *Toxoplasma gondii*, which can infect nearly any warm-blooded animal and prefers to live inside brain cells. It forms cysts in neurons that can persist for life. The researchers report that they found infected neurons release fewer extracellular vesicles (EVs) — tiny, membrane-bound packets used by cells to exchange information.

Wilson’s team found the parasite interferes with essential communication between brain cells - research that can offer new ways to detect and treat chronic brain infections.

“We found this disruption in EV signaling can interfere with how neurons and glial cells, especially astrocytes, maintain a healthy brain environment,” Wilson said. “Even a handful of infected neurons can shift the brain’s neurochemical balance. This suggests that communication between neurons and supporting glial cells is not only critical, but also vulnerable to hijacking by parasites.”

“The parasite may play a larger role in neurological and behavioral conditions than we previously thought,” she added.

## USING COMIC BOOKS TO COMMUNICATE HEALTH ISSUES

David Lo, MD, PhD, a distinguished professor of biomedical sciences and avid supporter of finding ways to bridge science and community, is using his passion for comic books and graphic novels to help communicate complex health issues, particularly those affecting communities in Southern California.

Lo, who teaches a course on graphic narratives in medical humanities, said “comics are a unique way to tell stories - especially stories about health and science - that engage people differently than traditional formats.”

So far, Lo and his team have completed three books, with versions in both English and Spanish. The books are distributed free to clinics, community events, and seminars. While the books cost about \$10 to print, they are always given away for free.

One of these is a children’s comic created by medical student Zayan Musa on how the body heals wounds. Titled “Jimmy’s Scab Adventure,” Musa wrote the original version in English in rhyme, then translated it into Spanish, also in rhyme.

Lo began thinking of using comics to communicate research about the Salton Sea and its health effects on nearby communities in an engaging and accessible format. Looking forward he has plans for future books on topics that affect the people of Inland Southern California.

“Health is still our starting point. Right now, we’re working on a project about high arsenic levels in groundwater in the Coachella Valley,” Lo said. “We’re also exploring air quality issues and how wildfire smoke and diesel exhaust impacts health. From there, we want to address broader issues, like community health disparities, without using jargon. Instead, we tell real stories about people’s experiences and challenges.”

For more information or to donate, visit <https://breathe.ucr.edu/breathebooks>.



Comic books published recently by Dr. David Lo.

# CONNECTING MEDICAL RESEARCH AND THE MILITARY

A new summer internship partnership between the UCR School of Medicine and the United States Military Academy West Point that began in the summer of 2024 is giving cadets new research opportunities and pushing research that may aid the US military and its service members.

Cadets Madison Critcher, Audrey Whitfield, and Xinyi Sherry Feng worked in the labs of Scott Pegan, PhD, a professor of biomedical sciences and Army lieutenant colonel, David Lo, MD, PhD, distinguished professor of biomedical sciences and director of UCR's BREATHE Laboratory, and Erica Heinrich, PhD, assistant professor of biomedical sciences.

"This connection between the School of Medicine and United States Military Academy aims to foster research collaborations and cultural exchanges that enable SOM to aid the nation in key areas that safeguard the health of these often-underrepresented populations in medicine," said Pegan. "These opportunities lead to cadets making tangible contributions to scientific exploration reflected in scientific literature as a manner to help prepare them for the role of physician."

Critcher emphasized the importance of building ties between the schools while drawing on their combined resources to further cadets' education. As the first person in her immediate family to pursue either a medical doctor or military path, Critcher said her goal is to help as many people as possible. "I've always felt a certain call to service," Critcher explained. "I believe that one specific way I can [serve people] is by dedicating my time and helping people get access to medical care, or providing that medical care myself."

At UCR, Critcher said she hoped to learn skills to take back to West Point. Her work in Pegan's lab contributed to a project examining the Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever

virus to work toward future vaccines and treatments. "I'm learning about the mechanisms behind the virus, and I'm learning techniques for preparing the protein to be studied and basically to be turned into a crystal and photographed," she said. "A lot of the techniques in virology that Lieutenant Colonel Pegan and his lab group are teaching me here I hope to apply at West Point, which goes to help me in securing additional grants...and help me write my own research papers in the future."

Whitfield encouraged other cadets to participate in the program. "All the professors and students I've spoken to just do a really good job of being very welcoming, and they're always willing to help," she said. "Everything I've experienced so far has just made me a better person and made me want to continue this as a career in the future."



"THESE OPPORTUNITIES LEAD TO CADETS MAKING TANGIBLE CONTRIBUTIONS TO SCIENTIFIC EXPLORATION REFLECTED IN SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE AS A MANNER TO HELP PREPARE THEM FOR THE ROLE OF PHYSICIAN."

- Scott Pegan, PhD





## RODRIGUEZ NAMED ASSOC. DEAN FOR CLINICAL RESEARCH

In April 2025, veteran emergency medicine physician Robert M. Rodriguez, MD, joined the UCR School of Medicine as the new associate dean for clinical research.

He came from UC San Francisco where he was a professor of emergency medicine and vice chair of research. He also served as the research director and inquiry director for the SJV PRIME+ program at UCSF.

The associate dean for clinical research provides leadership in clinical research at the UCR SOM and UCR Health, with responsibilities in expanding the clinical research footprint and fostering translational research through strategic planning, goal setting, grants acquisition, and implementation.

"I can't say enough about how honored and thrilled I am to join the UCR family," Rodriguez said. "It's truly a dream come true to join the team. Collaboration, innovation and transparency are my core operating principles, and research mentorship is my passion."

Rodriguez previously served as principal investigator on multiple RO1 and U grants, leading national teams examining issues in trauma, public health, infectious diseases and critical care. He has received multiple mentoring, humanitarian and scientific awards, including the Unidos US Xcellence in Leadership Award, the American College of Emergency Physicians Outstanding Contributions to Research Award, and the UCSF Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Award.

In May, Rodriguez received the Sheryl Herron, MD, MPH, Legacy Award at the Society of Academic Emergency Medicine annual meeting in May. The award honors an emergency medicine physician who exemplifies the legacy of Dr. Herron in terms of emergency medicine research in underserved, diverse populations.

## CELEBRATION OF WOMEN IN MEDICINE AND SCIENCE

In September, the UCR School of Medicine hosted the 2024 Celebration of Women in Medicine & Science, honoring women's contributions to science while looking to the future. The annual event featured a keynote address by Deena McRae, MD, associate vice president for Academic Health Sciences in the University of California Health division office.

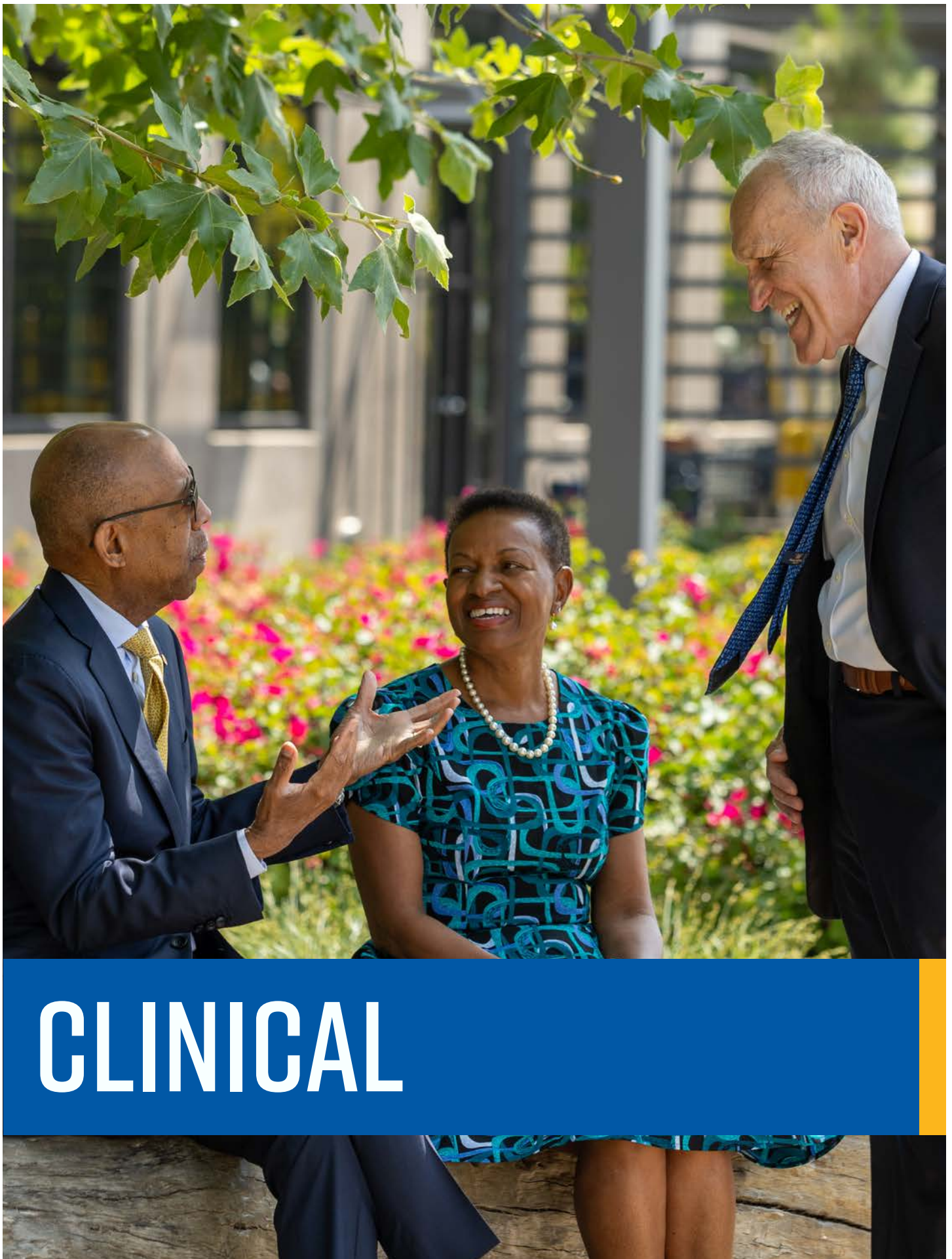
In her keynote address, titled "Turning the Tide: Elevating Women Physicians of Color through Inclusive Innovation," McRae pointed out the lack of women in leadership roles in academic medicine and health systems—and particularly women of color. "There's evidence that shows that women are promoted more slowly, paid less for identical work as their male colleagues, experience bullying and sexual harassment at greater rates, and receive fewer leadership opportunities," McRae said. But, she continued, "We can do something to drive positive change."

McRae praised events like this one and the fact that the UCR SOM has many women leaders, including Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, the vice chancellor for health sciences and the Mark and Pam Rubin dean of the School of Medicine. She encouraged organizations to regularly evaluate pay and look for inequities, to improve the work experience for people underrepresented in medicine, and to find trends to help address the issue moving forward.

Rosemary Tyrrell, EdD, director of the Office of Faculty Development and an assistant professor in the Department of Social Medicine, Population and Public Health, co-organized the event alongside the SOM's Strategic Initiatives team. Tyrrell said she hoped attendees left with "a better understanding of the data related to women in medicine and science and a 'call to action' to become engaged in this work."

A panel discussion followed the keynote address, featuring Denise Martinez, MD, associate dean of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Adwoa Osei, MD, director of the Program in Medical Education (PRIME), and Evita Limon-Rocha, MD, MPH, chair of the SOM Admissions Committee.

When McRae asked the panelists to give advice to those in attendance, Limon-Rocha shared the reminder that their voice and perspective is valuable. "Even though you may not feel like your voice matters... don't feel afraid to be brave," she said. "Without you, there is no representation."



# CLINICAL

# GROWING TO SERVE MORE OF THE INLAND EMPIRE'S NEEDS



On June 3, UCR Health and the UCR School of Medicine announced a 10-year, multi-phase expansion of its clinical footprint at a signing ceremony in Riverside. The initial phases of the clinical expansion will grow UCR Health from three up to 10 clinics and will establish a regional health sciences campus and a specialty ambulatory center. The project is the largest undertaken by UCR Health since its founding and is in collaboration with TDA Investment Group.

“We envision the UC Riverside Health Sciences campus as a major academic medical hub for our Inland Empire communities,” said UCR Health CEO Tim Collins, who added that the land is entitled for a specialty ambulatory center, a possible 280-bed acute care academic medical center, a dedicated parking structure, and a separate medical office building.

“The project represents a long-term strategic investment in the region’s healthcare infrastructure,” Collins said. “Each new clinic will create a trusted space where community members feel listened to, empowered, and cared for. In parallel, we are also training and retaining a future physician workforce that understands the unique needs of our region, ensuring that care is not only excellent but deeply rooted in empathy and understanding community needs.”

In addition to the physical growth, UCR Health continues to move forward with the development of a unified, mission-driven physician medical group.

“This will be a key element in a new provider network aimed at supporting high quality care, excellent patient experience, care coordination, population health management, and value-based care along with community-based network providers and payers,” Collins said.

Both expansions portend an exciting period of growth for the healthcare system that will work toward fulfilling the mission by helping more people live healthier lives and making sure everyone has access to top-quality care close to home.

“Through the campus development with TDA, the strategic growth of our ambulatory footprint, and the expansion of education and training programs, UCR Health and the School of Medicine are laying the foundation for a regionally integrated academic health system dedicated to the Inland Southern California community and addressing future concerns of clinical workforce adequacy,” Collins added.



# UCR HEALTH LEADS AS FIRST MILK DEPOT FOR UC HEALTH

The UCR Health Milk Depot, which collects breastmilk for community members in need, celebrated its grand opening on August 20, 2024 at the UCR Health Inland Empire Women's Health Center in Riverside. Overseen by Brenda Ross, MD, maternal fetal medicine specialist at UCR Health, the depot is partnering with the UC Health Milk Bank at UC San Diego to help families and facilities in need of human milk for small or sick newborns.

"Breastfeeding is one of the most natural things a woman can do," Ross said. "Many studies show it's beneficial for the baby and mom. In moms it decreases the risk of developing diabetes and helps her bond with her baby. Babies who are breastfed are less likely to have problems with ear infections; antibodies they get from their mothers help to reduce other types of infection. Breastfeeding also decreases the risk of obesity in children. It's why having a depot like ours is so important."

A breastmilk depot is a collection site that accepts approved mothers' milk. When a parent's breastmilk is unavailable or insufficient, pasteurized donor human milk is the next best thing to prevent necrotizing enterocolitis, a devastating intestinal disease that affects premature or very low birth weight infants and is a leading cause of infant death. Typically, donors are mothers who produce more milk than their child can use or end up with milk they can't use because their baby develops intolerance to the milk.

"We are excited to be able to bring this depot to the Inland Empire," Ross said. "It's an important message celebrating womanhood, motherhood, and parenting. It also increases awareness of breastfeeding."

According to Ross, multiple studies have shown that women of color don't breastfeed at the same rates or for the same periods of time as other women, with Black mothers having the lowest reported breastfeeding initiation rate at 74.5%.

Alison Wolf, executive director for UC Health Milk Bank, explained that donated milk is screened and processed into a safe, pasteurized milk product and distributed by the facility in San Diego to hospitalized or newly born children across Southern California.

"Women interested in milk donation can reach out to the UC Health Milk Bank to learn more about the five easy steps to become an approved milk donor," she said. "Milk donation is a vital gift that benefits fragile infants in our region."



# LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY TO ADDRESS DIABETES CRISIS



Diabetes continues to be a major problem in Inland Southern California. Recognizing this challenge, UCR Health has implemented point-of-care testing for Hemoglobin A1c (HbA1c), a blood test that measures a person's blood sugar levels. The test is a key diagnostic and monitoring tool for diabetes and prediabetes.

The HbA1c test takes just 10 minutes and is conducted on patients who are known to be diabetic. Physicians and patients receive their results quickly, allowing them to make informed healthcare decisions on managing diabetes. "The immediate lab results enable healthcare professionals to provide care plans during the visit, eliminating additional visits and trips to outside laboratories, thus making both the visit and the testing more efficient," said UCR Health CEO Tim Collins.

UCR Health also instituted a screening protocol to conduct essential retinal eye exams for diabetic patients during routine visits, catching early signs of disease without the need for a specialist referral.

Another improvement was the development of tools within UCR Health's Epic electronic health record platform to track patients whose diabetes and hypertension are not under control so clinicians can help people live healthier.

The Clinical Informatics team used UC Health Population Health algorithms that prompt physicians and staff to take action using a set of orders based on UC guidelines to manage and help patients achieve control of these chronic conditions. Additional tools called "express lanes" enhance preventive care and well visits for children, adults, and seniors.

"Our investment in clinical technology is not about efficiency alone; it's about enabling compassionate, responsive care," said Chief Medical Officer Naveen Raja, DO, MBA. "From improving communication between care teams to enabling same-day decisions for patients with chronic conditions, our technology platforms ensure that every patient feels seen, heard, and supported."

## RESOURCE FINDER – HELPING OVERCOME SOCIAL VULNERABILITIES

A major factor impacting the availability of quality healthcare is the fact that many people across Inland Southern California are suffering from social vulnerabilities that make it harder to access basic care. These include challenges like food insecurity and lack of access to reliable transportation.

To help address these issues, UCR Health introduced the Resource Finder, which helps patients find free or reduced cost resources quickly, including transportation to and from their clinic appointments. It is currently available on the UCR Health website at [ucrhealth.org/resourcefinder/](https://ucrhealth.org/resourcefinder/)

# BUILDING A PRACTICE BY REMOVING BLOCKS

UCR Health physician and Chair of the Department of Family Medicine Michelle Bholat, MD, has long been interested in the way clinicians and patients move through health centers. She and others saw impediments to patient access and satisfaction including doctors being double-booked and patients not showing up for appointments. Bholat envisioned using the Epic electronic health record to address some of these barriers by removing time-specific blocks for new patients. This would open up physicians' schedules to meet patient demand while balancing physician satisfaction.

"How clinic staff and doctors communicate and coordinate patients through the clinic is extremely important for patient and healthcare team satisfaction," Bholat said. "But the Epic template blocks affected scheduling and more. By collaborating with UCR Health staff and IT, we effectively removed preference blocks, which means we are filling empty schedules with patients. This, in turn, gives patients better access to care."

Working as a team helps guide workflow processes and allows physicians to aid in guiding clinical operations and driving quality care for all age groups. For example, Family Medicine IT representative Blanca Campos, MD, worked with UCR Health IT to standardize practice templates, leading to more efficient documentation.

The data from this project will allow UCR Health to teach and train incoming physicians and residents in the use of the standardized documents.

"Our philosophy is simple: By standardizing how we coordinate all disciplines, we can provide better patient guidance and gain greater knowledge," Bholat said. "We constantly ask if what we're doing fits the patient population. If what we do better together serves the patient, we are accomplishing our goal."

"The mindset of doctors is that we want to bring in new patients because they're seeking care. By removing barriers, we are showing that we're here for them and that we're bringing healthcare home for all," she added.

Another change implemented in Family Medicine is the use of teams of two or three clinicians in the practice, each assigned to specific teams in the Epic Book-It module. This helps facilitate patient continuity of care by helping with messaging and communication, building a team approach, and setting expectations. After being piloted in Family Medicine, the aim is that it will soon be implemented throughout other disciplines at UCR Health.

"When we take the challenges that are presented and work together to solve them, we build lasting, fulfilling practices," Bholat said. "That's the goal."

**"OUR PHILOSOPHY IS SIMPLE: BY STANDARDIZING HOW WE COORDINATE ALL DISCIPLINES, WE CAN PROVIDE BETTER PATIENT GUIDANCE AND GAIN GREATER KNOWLEDGE."**

- Michelle Bholat, MD



## HERODIA ALLEN APPOINTED AS UCR HEALTH CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

Herodia Allen was named the new chief operating officer (COO) of UCR Health on October 14, 2024. She brings a wealth of experience in population health and health system operations, having most recently served as COO for the Woodland Hills and West Ventura service area at Kaiser Permanente since December 2020.

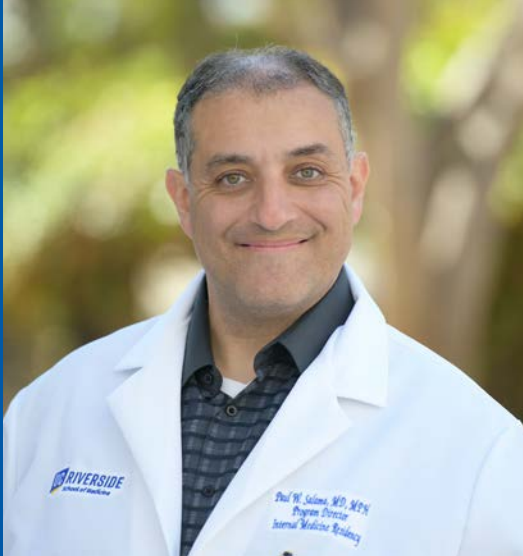
"We are thrilled to welcome Herodia Allen to UCR Health," said Timothy Collins, EdD, MHA, chief executive officer of UCR Health. "Her extensive leadership experience and

deep understanding of healthcare systems will play a critical role in our continued growth and our mission to provide top-tier healthcare to our community."

Allen collaborates closely with UCR Health's senior leadership team to advance strategic initiatives, expand clinical services, and foster partnerships across the Inland Southern California region. "I am honored to join the exceptional team of UCR Health physicians and staff and to support building and expanding clinical programs across the Inland Empire communities," Allen said.

In addition to her experiences at Kaiser Permanente, Allen has also held leadership roles at Stanford Health Care and UCSF Medical Center. A graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, Allen holds a bachelor's degree in molecular and cell biology and English. She also earned a master of public health from UC Berkeley and an MBA from the Wharton School of Business.

## PREPARING PHYSICIANS TO SERVE THE UNDERSERVED



Recently, the Internal Medicine residency within the UCR School of Medicine embarked on a new schedule commonly referred to as 4+1 System, where residents spend four weeks in rotations that are not part of the primary care clinic. The goal is to contribute to their overall well-being and enthusiasm for practicing medicine by allowing them to spend more time with their own patients. This, in turn, assists with patient care and the UCR Health philosophy of putting the patient first. The plus-one week provides an entire uninterrupted week of primary care.

“In the past, the residents would spend a half day in the clinic followed by a half day at the hospital, or vice versa,” said Internal Medicine Residency Program Director Paul Salama, MD. “The constant interruption to change where they were and

who they were seeing meant that they couldn’t devote the focus needed for their patients. By implementing this 4+1 System, they not only get exposure to subspecialties such as cardiology, neurology, and rheumatology, but they also can devote full attention to their primary care patients.”

Additional changes that have been implemented within the Internal Medicine residency program include a new rotation to assist interns in learning procedures, something very important for resident education. This rotation allows categorical interns to become competent in many bedside procedures so that they can supervise junior learners in the future. The goal is to ensure that residents leave the program more experienced to become full physicians.

The GME program has also overhauled the noon conference to include daily educational activities whereby the residents learn about the vast array of medical conditions that internal medicine doctors are expected to recognize, diagnose, and treat. They are also taught how to talk to patients, how to deal with challenging psychosocial and family situations, and how to respond to different emergencies in the hospital.

“We conduct a financial workshop series that goes in-depth about the financial and business aspect of being a physician,” Salama said. “This teaches them how to deal with debt once they’re out of school and making money. Importantly, it addresses their overall future. Doctors that can take better care of themselves in business are better with patients because the stress level has been reduced.”

The residency program is also looking to introduce new rotations that will allow residents to be further exposed to underserved patients, enhancing residents’ ability to serve these patients effectively while improving access to care for these communities. Finally, the residency is making significant adjustments to the resident selection process, allowing the School of Medicine to bring in residents that want to be in the Inland Empire and are thus more motivated to remain here to pursue their career.



# COMMUNITY



# OPEN HOUSE 2025

The UCR School of Medicine's Open House 2025 took place in April, welcoming a record 1,200 guests who learned about the school and paths to careers in medicine and healthcare. The daylong event, which included medical student panels, tours of the Center for Simulated Patient Care, CPR demonstrations, faculty presentations, and more offered a unique opportunity for students of all ages to visualize themselves in medical school and feel encouraged to apply. Families also had the chance to learn about the medical school admission process and experience the campus firsthand.



# TEACHING YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT PROPER HEALTH AND NUTRITION

A collaboration between the Center for Healthy Communities (CHC), the Inland Empire Street Medicine (IESM) program, and Temalpakh Farms, run by the Augustine Band of the Cahuilla Indians in the Coachella Valley, led to a two day nutrition education program for students at the Nova Academy High School in Santa Ana in April.

Hosted by UCR undergraduate and medical student volunteers, the learning activities centered around the importance of proper nutrition on health and longevity. The program included demonstrations and one-on-one guidance from UCR student volunteers. Students gained valuable insights into the importance of food choices and their connection to overall health.

"It was awesome. I even learned something during the presentation. I loved how they [UCR undergraduate and medical students] included aspects of the Cahuilla diet," said Adrienne Edmondson, a Temalpakh tribal educator. "I loved everyone's enthusiasm and how they spoke to our kids."



## SOM CELEBRATES NATIONAL LATINO PHYSICIAN DAY 2024



The UCR School of Medicine Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion hosted the second annual National Latino Physician Day celebration on September 28 to honor the contributions of Latino/a/e/x physicians and work to improve quality of care for Latino populations in the U.S. According to Michael Galvez, MD, creator of National Latino Physician Day, UCR's event was the largest in the nation at over 350 attendees.

The event, which was co-sponsored by Chicano Student Programs, featured keynote speakers California Surgeon General Diana Ramos, MD, MPH, and David Hayes-Bautista, director of the UCLA School of Medicine Center for the Study of Latino Health and Culture.

In her keynote address, "Rising to the Challenge: Orgullo Latino: Leading the Way," Ramos shared the values her mother instilled in her of hard work and education. During her medical residency in Los Angeles, Ramos recalled seeing the need for Spanish-speaking physicians to serve the community and advocate for patients. "Querer es poder" ("Where there's a will, there's a way"), she told the audience, reminding them not to give up on the fight to achieve representation in medicine while improving quality of care.

"After listening to our keynote speakers, the audience was left feeling energized and inspired," said Denise Martinez, MD, associate dean of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and a health sciences clinical professor. "It was inspiring to see families, including parents who brought their children, engaging with the event, sharing in their culture, and listening to the stories of current and future physicians," she added. "There was a palpable sense of hope that one day, these children could follow in their footsteps."

Congress members Raul Ruiz, MD (25th District), a founding faculty member of the UCR School of Medicine, and Yadira Caraveo, MD (8th District) designated October 1 as National Latino Physician Day in 2023. Currently, only six percent of physicians in the U.S. identify as Latino despite Latinos making up 19% of the U.S. population and over 50% of the population in the Inland Empire.



## UCR SCHOOL OF MEDICINE DEAN NAMED TO VA NATIONAL ACADEMIC AFFILIATIONS COUNCIL

Deborah Deas, MD, MPH, vice chancellor of health sciences and the Mark and Pam Rubin Dean of the UCR School of Medicine, has been selected to serve on the Department of Veterans Affairs National Academic Affiliations Council, or NAAC. Deas' initial three-year term on the council began on October 1, 2024.

"I'm incredibly grateful to be a newly appointed member of this council," Deas said. "It's an honor to serve the public in this capacity, and I look forward to lending my voice in support of partnerships between the VA and its academic affiliates across the nation."

The NAAC provides guidance to the leadership of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, or VA, on issues related to its interactions with the health professions community. Comprising 14 members, the council has a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of patient care, education, and research.

# 2024-2025 AWARD RECIPIENTS

## FACULTY

### Outstanding 1st Year Instructor

Iryna Ethell, PhD  
Associate Dean Academic Affairs

### Outstanding 2nd Year Instructor

Emad Ibrahim, MD  
Associate Clinical Professor

### Outstanding 3rd Year Instructor

Brenda Ross, MD  
Assistant Clinical Professor, Health Sciences, OBGYN

### Outstanding 4th Year Instructor

Nathaniel Fung, MD  
Division of Acute Care Surgery, RUHS

### Outstanding LACE Doctor Year 1

Roopa Viraraghavan, MD  
Associate Clinical Professor, Pediatrics

### Outstanding LACE Doctor Year 2

Henry Pham, MD  
Assistant Clinical Professor, Volunteer Faculty, Family Medicine

### Outstanding LACE Doctor Year 3

Letty Emery, MD  
Family Medicine Kaiser Murrieta

### Alumni Recognition Award for Excellence in Teaching

Lucas Friedman, MD, MEd  
Associate Clinical Professor in the Department of Family Medicine and Ultrasound Program Director

### Neal L. Schiller Award for Excellence in Compassionate Medical Education

Lien-Khuong Tran, MD

### Excellence in Patient Care

Brenda Ross, MD  
Assistant Clinical Professor, Health Sciences, OBGYN

### Award for Healthcare Innovation

Scott Zeller, MD  
Assistant Clinical Professor Psychiatry and Neuroscience,

### Award for Professionalism

Harry Dao, MD  
Volunteer Assistant Clinical Professor, Internal Medicine

### Outstanding Community Service Award

Brenda Ross, MD  
Assistant Clinical Professor, Health Sciences, OBGYN

### School of Medicine Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Award

Adwoa Osei, MD  
Associate Clinical Professor, Health Sciences, Pediatrics

### Outstanding Mentor of the Year Award

Daniel Novak, PhD  
Director of Student Scholarly Activities

### Research Achievement Award in Biomedical or Basic Science

Nicholas DiPatrizio, PhD  
Professor, Division of Biomedical Sciences

### Research Achievement Award in Clinical Science

Lisa Fortuna, MD, MPH  
Chair and Professor of Psychiatry and Neuroscience

### Research Achievement Award for Population Health Research

Andrew Subica, PhD  
Associate Professor, Department of Social Medicine, Population and Public Health

### Basic Science Educator of the Year

Declan McCole, PhD  
Professor, Division of Biomedical Sciences

### Community Educator of the Year

Alina Popa, MD  
Health Sciences Clinical Professor, Program Director of Riverside Community Hospital/UCR Internal Medicine Residency Program

### Lifetime Achievement Award in Education

Adolfo Aguilera, MD  
Associate Clinical Professor, Family Medicine

### Distinguished School of Medicine Service to UCR Cross-Campus Community Award

Declan McCole, PhD  
Professor of Biomedical Sciences

### Distinguished School of Medicine Service Award Junior Faculty Member

Toshia Yamaguchi, MD  
Health Sciences Assistant Clinical Professor, Psychiatry and Neuroscience Department

## STUDENTS

### Cancer Research Scholars Award from the SOM/City of Hope U54 team

Allen Seylani, Class of 2025

### Outstanding LACE Students

Jonpaul Urias, Class of 2028  
Benjamin Corbett, Class of 2027  
Isuru Karunatilaka, Class of 2026

### Outstanding Clerkship Students

Nolan Langford, Class of 2026  
Sophia Potalivo, Class of 2026  
Allen Seylani, Class of 2025  
Meghna Patel, Class of 2025

### Thomas Haider Clinical Award of Excellence

Marina Joseph, Class of 2025

### Stewart and Elaine Shankel Award

Chris Mehdizadeh, Class of 2025

### Dean's Mission and Values Award

Madelin Andrade, Class of 2025

### Dean's Social Justice Award

Xaida Wright, Class of 2025

### Outstanding Student – Obstetrics and Gynecology

Prashila Amatya, Class of 2025

### Outstanding Student – Pediatrics

Aya Shokai, Class of 2025  
Reysa Patel, Class of 2025

## STAFF

### Community Service Award

Stephanie Sandoval  
Health Educator, Social Medicine, Population and Public Health

### Staff Clinical, Administrative, Research, and Education (CARE) Awards Clinical

Nancy Elizando  
Medical Assistant, UCR Health

Maria De La Cruz  
Medical Assistant/Patient Care Coordinator, UCR Health

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Financial Analyst, Business Operations Research

Jo Gerrard  
Grant Writer, Sponsored Research & Programs

Hermila Torres  
Biomedical Sciences Graduate Student Services Advisor

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Director of Medical Education, Office of Undergraduate Medical Education

Amanda Limon  
Community Health Education Program Coordinator

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