



## LETTER FROM THE CHAIR



Dear Colleagues,

Hope springs eternal. It's not just a seasonal theme, but also a concept much on my mind as I reflect on our Department's stellar showing at the 18th Annual Academic Surgical Congress (ASC), held in Houston this past month. ASC is a joint meeting of the two leading associations for academic surgery – The Association for Academic Surgery (AAS) and The Society of University Surgeons (SUS). UC San Diego's own Dr. Rebekah White presided as [President of SUS](#) over this important meeting and is due our hearty congratulations along with her leadership team for an incredible meeting and year of service.

As a Platinum Academic Sponsor of the event, we are committed to the missions of these associations and the importance of this gathering. UC San Diego was very well represented in the programs giving us an incredible opportunity to showcase our Department at its finest. The dozens of talks and posters our faculty and trainees presented are proof positive that despite the many challenges of the past few years and into this one, academic surgery and surgical research are thriving at UC San Diego.

Back at home, we are celebrating the recent achievement of Dr. Kristin Mekeel, chief of our Division of Transplant and Hepatobiliary Surgery, who is reportedly the first surgeon and one of only a few doctors at UC San Diego to have earned her Lean Six Sigma Black Belt. To earn this certification, Dr. Mekeel completed a cross-functional process improvement project resulting in at least a \$100k impact for UC San Diego Health. In this month's newsletter Q&A, Dr. Mekeel discusses her project and what drove her to focus her important efforts in process improvement.

We're also pleased to announce the expansion of the UC San Diego Center for Health Innovation, which will fund a novel patient-care "mission control center" within Jacobs Medical Center. The future mission control center will serve as a hyper-connected hub to monitor patient health and safety by way of

a host of wearable data devices, electronic health records, bedside monitors and more. The goal is to develop AI algorithms and models that improve access to healthcare, personalize treatments and improve the patient experience – for every patient.

Speaking of technology, we're in the mood to celebrate our little wins, too, such as a "spring refresh" of our [Department website](#). As I said, hope is at the forefront of our minds here as this new season begins, and we expect the feeling to continue well into the year to come. I get a boost each time I read about the important accomplishments of our team, and it's my personal hope that your own spirits are buoyed by all the rich good news you can find here.

Gratefully,

Bryan Clary, MD, MBA

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## SUPPORT THE WORK OF UC SAN DIEGO'S DEPARTMENT OF SURGERY

With your help, the Department of Surgery at UC San Diego School of Medicine is changing lives. Financial support from our community is critical to providing leading-edge surgical care to thousands of people every year. Your partnership enables UC San Diego's Department of Surgery to continue to serve our region's patients with the most expert care available.

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### Q&A: DR. KRISTIN MEKEEL RECEIVES LEAN SIX SIGMA BLACK BELT



Kristin Mekeel, MD, chief of the UC San Diego Division of Transplant and Hepatobiliary Surgery, is the first surgeon at UC San Diego and one of only a few physicians at UC San Diego to have earned her [Lean Six Sigma Black Belt](#). To receive this certification, Dr. Mekeel completed a cross-functional process improvement project resulting in at least a \$100k impact for UC San Diego Health.

Dr. Mekeel is a board-certified transplant surgeon who specializes in liver, kidney, and pancreas transplantation surgery in adults and children. She performs operations in patients with conditions such as chronic kidney disease, chronic liver disease, liver cancer and diabetes. As Chief of Transplant and Hepatobiliary Surgery, Dr. Mekeel leads a group of four surgeons performing over 250 transplants, living and deceased donor organ procurements, and other surgeries per year. She also serves as vice-chair of Quality for the Department of Surgery and program director for Surgical Quality at UC San Diego Health. In these roles, Dr. Mekeel oversees quality and safety for operating rooms and surgical subspecialties.

In this month's Q&A, Dr. Mekeel discusses her project for the Lean Six Sigma program, how it will benefit the field of surgery (as well as patients) and what motivates her to continue her important work.

**Q: What was your project and why was it recognized?**

**A:** My project was creating a surgeon feedback loop. Using a QR code, surgeons can log into a brief survey about their case and report any problems they had with equipment, instruments, staffing or other issues during their case. This survey goes directly to the coordinators for their services and there is an action plan and response with two weeks.

**Q: How might your project benefit the Department or the field of surgery on the whole?**

**A:** The goal was to increase surgeon feedback on their cases and find solutions to make future cases

more efficient for surgeons and safer for patients.

**Q: What drew you to the field as a surgeon?**

**A:** My surgical rotation on transplant surgery as a resident not only drew me to the field of surgery but to transplantation. The operations require immense technical skill and have immediate positive results. Watching a kidney pink up with blood flow and make urine is extremely rewarding. I love telling patients they are off dialysis because they have a new functioning kidney. Transplantation also requires surgeons to be very good clinicians. When I was a medical student I thought they were the superheroes of the hospital and could not wait to join the club.

**Q: What motivates you to keep going?**

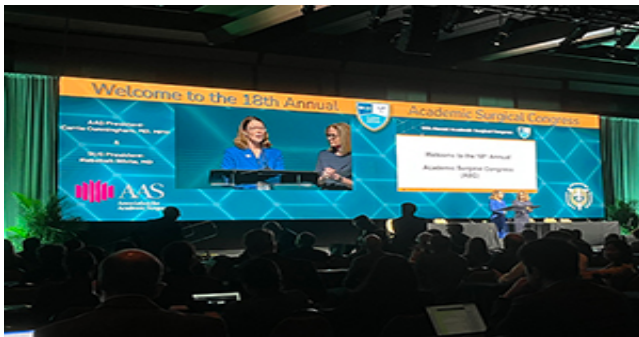
**A:** Motivation becomes harder as you age, especially in surgery, which is a very physical job. While I still find transplant surgery rewarding, I am more passionate about my administrative roles in quality and patient safety. I enjoy working in the bigger picture and solving systems problems that impact the quality and safety of all patients who are treated at UC San Diego Health.

**Q: In what direction would you like to see the field of surgery heading in the coming decades?**

**A:** I would like the field of surgery to continue to be kinder. We should be kinder to ourselves, our colleagues, and our patients. I think we have come a long way from when I started in surgery, but there is work to be done.

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## RESEARCH NEWS



### UC San Diego Surgery Turns Out in Full Force for Academic Surgical Congress 2023

The UC San Diego Department of Surgery was well-represented at the 18th annual Academic Surgical Congress, a joint meeting of the two leading associations for academic surgery – The Association for Academic Surgery (AAS) and The Society of University Surgeons (SUS). As President of SUS, Rebekah White, MD, FACS, of the UC San Diego Division of Surgical Oncology presided over the meeting and delivered the SUS Presidential Address on "Work-Life Integration for Academic Surgeons," a discussion of how the COVID pandemic has blurred the boundaries between work and home.

Along with Jason Sicklick, MD, FACS, also of the UC San Diego Division of Surgical Oncology, Dr. White co-taught a virtual Association of Academic Surgeons/SUS Surgical Investigators' Course attended by more than 40 surgeons.

[Read on for more, including tweets from the event](#)

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## UC San Diego's Astrobiotechnology Hub to Drive Drug Discovery in Space

*Leaders in academia, biotechnology and aerospace industries unite in their mission to advance stem cell science in space.*

For stem cell research at UC San Diego, the sky's no longer the limit.

Over the last five years, the university has become a pioneer in performing stem cell research in space. In a series of successful launches, researchers have sent blood, brain and liver stem cells onto NASA's International Space Station (ISS), where the unique environment of low Earth orbit (LEO) offers an unparalleled view into the molecular mechanisms of cancer and aging.

These pioneering experiments have now paved the way for a new era in health science research. On February 27, 2023, leaders of the UC San Diego Sanford Stem Cell Institute announced the launch of a new Astrobiotechnology Hub, which brings together academic, industry and government partners to drive scientific and commercial innovation in stem cell research.

The announcement came a day before key members of the hub present their plans at the 2023 Biocom California Global Life Science Partnering & Investor Conference. The event marks the first public meeting of leaders in stem cell research, biotechnology, aerospace and in-space manufacturing, with all groups coming together to build consensus and break new ground.

One line of research will investigate the effects of stress and aging on liver progenitor cells. This work is led by Tatiana Kisseleva, MD, PhD, professor of surgery at UC San Diego School of Medicine, and David A. Brenner, MD, president and chief executive officer of Sanford Burnham Prebys and former vice chancellor for Health Sciences at UC San Diego.

Kisseleva and Brenner study ailments of the liver, such as fibrosis and steatohepatitis, a type of fatty liver disease. They are interested in determining the impact of microgravity on liver function, which could provide insights into diseases on Earth, and the potential effects of space travel.

[Read more about UC San Diego's Astrobiotechnology Hub](#)

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## CLINICAL NEWS



### Center for Health Innovation Expands with \$22 Million in Gifts

*Support from Joan and Irwin Jacobs to create hospital-based mission control center to help solve real-world patient care needs*

With a generous \$22 million in gifts from Joan and Irwin Jacobs, UC San Diego Health will bring its Center for Health Innovation into full reality. The gifts will fund a novel patient-care "mission control center" within Jacobs Medical Center at UC San Diego Health and the Jacobs Chancellor's Endowed Chair in Digital Health Innovation. These initiatives and other plans will be

shared and celebrated on May 4-5 with the Innovation in Digital Health symposium for thought leaders across the nation.

“The Center for Health Innovation represents a singular opportunity to redefine the way our clinicians and patients leverage the power of technology and data to improve health outcomes,” said UC San Diego Chancellor Pradeep K. Khosla. “Once again, Joan and Irwin Jacobs are transforming health care in San Diego through their visionary generosity and kindness. We thank the Jacobs for their continued partnership in caring for our community, now and in the future.”



We owe an incredible debt of gratitude to the Jacobs family for always stepping forward to help us develop new ideas, places and technologies that will change patient care for the better,” said Patty Maysent, CEO, UC San Diego Health. “This gift will allow us to solve real-world patient care issues and translate them into safe patient-centered technologies that monitor, prevent or treat a variety of conditions.”

[The Center for Health Innovation](#) was founded in September 2021, with internal seed money from UC San Diego to develop and test technologies that make measurable differences in the lives of patients. After the center demonstrated multiple successes at scale, the Jacobs funded several initiatives that are scheduled over the next three to five years. The \$22 million in gifts builds upon the \$100 million to build Jacobs Medical Center, the 10-story, 245-bed academic medical center in La Jolla.

[Read more about the Center for Health Innovation](#)

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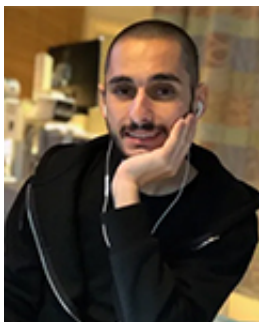
## TRAINING NEWS

### Division of Plastic Surgery offers Visiting Subinternship Scholarship for Underrepresented Students

The UC San Diego Division of Plastic Surgery is excited to announce that its Scholarship for Underrepresented Students for Visiting Subinternships is open and accepting applications. Any rising MS4 is welcome to apply and preference will be given to UIM students, students without home programs, LGBTQ, and/or First generation low income students. Applications are due March 20th and the selected student will be notified in early April. [Apply now](#).

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## FACULTY & STAFF NEWS



### Miles4Merak

2022 marked the third annual [Miles4Merak](#) step challenge, where participants can virtually join by logging in their daily steps through an online app over the course of a week to raise money for the cause. Miles4Merak was started by Maura Caffrey, a surgical oncology nurse who worked very closely with Merak Melikian Hatounian. At the age of 20, Merak was diagnosed with a rare hereditary form of cancer known as SDH-deficient Gastrointestinal Stromal Tumor (SDH-deficient GIST) and eventually passed away 5 years later. Since there is currently no cure for this disease, Miles4Merak was created to raise money to fund further research. GISTs are among a group of cancers known as sarcomas that arise in the gastrointestinal tract, and they are dangerous as they commonly

present with nonspecific symptoms. This past year, Miles4Merak was able to raise \$105,456 with over 25 million steps recorded for the cause, surpassing their initial goal of \$100,000 and gaining approximately \$30,000 more than the amount fundraised last year (\$72,997).

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## EVENTS

### **SAVE THE DATE: 11th Annual Department of Surgery Research Symposium**

This important event highlights the exciting research and practice changing discoveries that are being made by trainees and faculty in our Department.

**Tuesday, May 2, 2023 between 5:00 – 8:00 pm**

UC San Diego Faculty Club

**Wednesday, May 3, 2023 between 7:00 – 8:00 am**

Department Grand Rounds

Moore's Cancer Center - Goldberg Auditorium



***We are very pleased to host our invited speaker, Dr. Christine Lau***

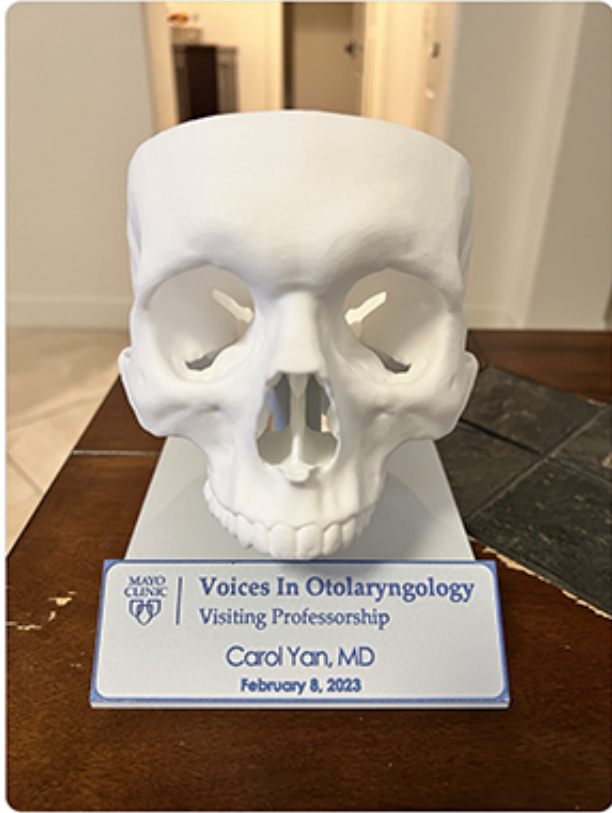
Christine L. Lau, MD, MBA is the Robert W. Buxton Professor and Chair of the Department of Surgery at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and the Surgeon-in-Chief at the University of Maryland Medical Center. She manages a Department of over one hundred multispecialty surgeons.

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## AS SEEN ON TWITTER

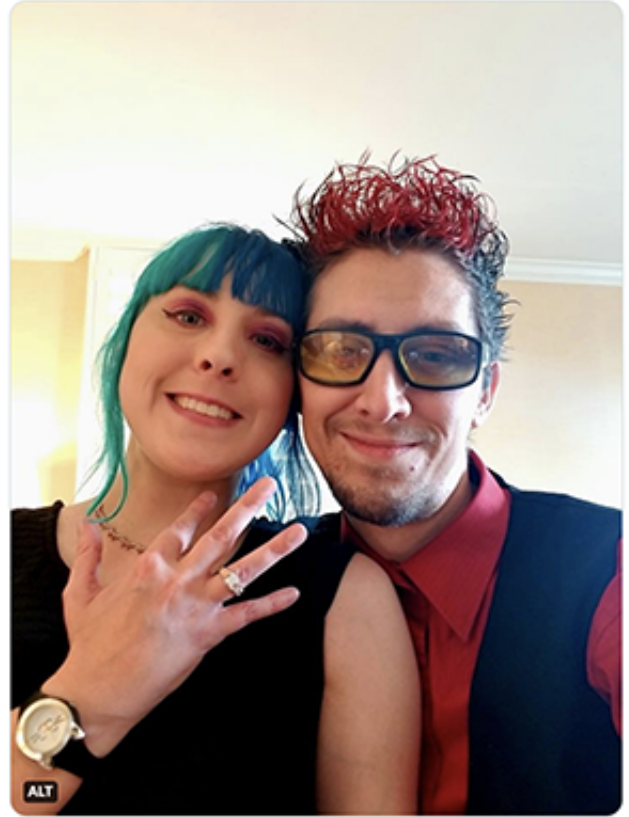
Carol Yan, MD  
@DrYanENT

This is awesome!!! 🙌 @MayoClinicENT @drsemirrabayan



UC San Diego Health  
@UCSDHealth

Zero and his wife Cat met through UC San Diego Health and both received lung transplants. "Next year will be our tenth anniversary, and we have #UCSDHealth to thank for that. Both for introducing us and for keeping us alive and well together." - Zero #DonorDay #ValentinesDay ❤️



UC San Diego Health  
@UCSDHealth

It takes a village, especially when it comes to #cancer care. As the only @theNCI designated Comprehensive Cancer Center in the region, the teams at Moores Cancer Center and #UCSDHealth clinics strive to provide personalized treatments. #WorldCancerDay [health.ucsd.edu/cancer](http://health.ucsd.edu/cancer)



Andrew Barleben  
@AndrewBarleben

Excellent presentation by @SZarintan discussing the role of covered stents the role of chronic central venous occlusion. @VenousForum. Manuscript coming soon @JVSVL. @UCSDsurgery @UCSDHealth @VESurgery



## THIS MONTH'S PUBLICATIONS

[Pediatric DUCT Score: A Highly Specific Predictive Model for Choledocholithiasis in Children.](#) Ignacio RC Jr, Kelley-Quon LI, Ourshalimian S, Padilla BE, Jensen AR, Shew SB, Lofberg KM, Smith CA, Roach JP, Pandya SR, Russell KW, Wang K; Western Pediatric Surgery Research Consortium Choledocholithiasis Investigative Group. *J Am Coll Surg.* 2023 Feb 14. doi: 10.1097/XCS.0000000000000650. Online ahead of print. PMID: 36786471

[Highlights from the International Chronic Thromboembolic Pulmonary Hypertension Congress 2021.](#) Simonneau G, Fadel E, Vonk Noordegraaf A, Toshner M, Lang IM, Klok FA, McInnis MC, Screaton N, Madani MM, Martinez G, Salaunkey K, Jenkins DP, Matsubara H, Brénot P, Hoepfer MM, Ghofrani HA, Jaïs X, Wiedenroth CB, Guth S, Kim NH, Pepke-Zaba J, Delcroix M, Mayer E. *Eur Respir Rev.* 2023 Feb 7;32(167):220132. doi: 10.1183/16000617.0132-2022. Print 2023 Mar 31. PMID: 36754432

[Identification of Degenerated Murine Facial Nerves With Fluorescence Labeling After Transection Injury.](#) Crawford KL, Lee YJ, Hom M, Rosenthal EL, Orosco RK, Nguyen QT. *Otolaryngol Head Neck Surg.* 2023 Feb 9. doi: 10.1002/ohn.262. Online ahead of print. PMID: 36758958

[See full list of publications](#)

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## IN THE NEWS

[Director of UC San Diego Health Regional Burn Center Offers Life-Saving Tips during Burn Awareness Week,](#) *UC San Diego Health News*, features Jeanne Lee, MD

[58 hospitals and health systems with heart programs to watch in 2023,](#) *Becker's Hospital Review*, features UC San Diego Health.

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## JOB LISTINGS

[Assistant, Associate or Full Professor \(HS Clinical, Clinical X, Adjunct, In-Residence\) Cardiovascular and Thoracic Surgery](#)

[Assistant, Associate or Full Professor \(HS Clinical, Clinical X, In-Residence, Adjunct\) Transplant Surgery](#)

[Assistant, Associate or Full Professor \(HS Clin, Clin X, In Residence, Adjunct\) - Plastic Surgery](#)

[Assistant, Associate or Full Professor \(HS Clin, Clin X, Adj, In-Residence\) - Pediatric Cardiothoracic Surgery](#)

[Assistant, Associate or Full Professor \(HS Clin, Clin X, Adjunct, In-Residence\) Vascular and Endovascular Surgery](#)

[Assistant, Associate of Full Professor \(HS Clin, Clin X, In Residence, Adjunct\) - Pediatric Surgery](#)

[Postdoctoral Research Fellowship](#)

[Assistant, Associate or Full Professor \(HS Clin, Clin X, In-Res, Adj\) - Surgery Biostatistician](#)


[Assistant, Associate or Full Professor \(HS Clin, Clin X, In-Res, Adj\) Otolaryngology - Head and Neck Surgical Oncology](#)

[Assistant, Associate of Full Professor \(HS Clin, Clin X, In Residence, Adjunct\) Trauma & Burn Surgeons](#)

[Assistant, Associate of Full Professor \(HS Clin, Clin X, In Residence, Adjunct\) - Pediatric Otolaryngologist](#)





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## ABOUT THE DEPARTMENT

The Department of Surgery at UC San Diego prides itself on maintaining a thriving clinical enterprise in 13 surgical divisions and providing exceptional care to patients; while educating future generations of surgeons and conducting ground-breaking research. Since 1968, our team of internationally recognized surgeons have performed cutting edge surgeries, which today include including awake brain surgery; heart-lung transplants; scarless appendectomies; and incisionless weight-loss surgery. We're proud of the research breakthroughs we make in surgical medicine and the quality rankings we achieve year after year. [surgery.ucsd.edu](https://surgery.ucsd.edu)