

Determined to Eradicate Pancreatic Cancer

The standard of care for pancreatic cancer has remained largely unchanged for many years and yet the incidence of the disease continues to increase, primarily due to the rise in obesity and the prevalence of high fat diets. By 2025, pancreatic cancer is anticipated to become the second leading cause of cancer deaths in the United States, surpassed only by lung cancer.

The immediacy of this brewing medical tsunami has inspired a tremendous unification from the University of California system and specifically its five campuses with medical schools – Davis, Irvine, Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco -- to create the University of California Pancreatic Cancer Consortium. UCLA is a major force in the Consortium because it is among the busiest academic centers for pancreatic cancer treatment and pancreatic surgery centers in the country. In 2018, more than 500 patients with pancreatic cancer were seen and treated by UCLA physicians. In this same period, more than 100 pancreatic cancer surgeries were performed.

In summer 2019, UCLA hosted a day-long symposium for members of the University of California Pancreatic Cancer Consortium at which a group priority was outlined: to apply for a Specialized Programs of Research Excellence (SPORE) grant from the National Cancer Institute. SPORE grants focus on a specific organ site and are designed to enable the rapid and efficient movement of basic science into patient care. UCLA has received two of these prestigious grants: one for prostate cancer and another focused on brain cancer.

To be awarded a very competitive SPORE grant, which provides millions of dollars in research funding, the applying entity must show significant interdisciplinary research, with a breadth of resulting data, to prove the validity of its potential success in the chosen subject – in this case, to better understand, diagnose and treat pancreatic cancer.

To accomplish the goal of receiving a pancreatic cancer SPORE award and to continue its leadership role in addressing pancreatic cancer, the UCLA Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center (JCCC) is seeking \$500,000 in current use funding, over a two year period. This important and much-needed support will empower the UCLA JCCC to fund a breadth of research projects delving into numerous areas, including Seed Grants for young investigators to pursue novel avenues or for experienced investigators to explore a new area of work; Impact Grants for unique collaborations across our academic campus; the further consideration of how the immune system, through immunotherapies, can be harnessed to arrest pancreatic cancer; and how targeted therapies can kill the cancerous cells while keeping the healthy cells intact.

The Principal Investigators of the funded initiatives will be grounded in one of the six research areas of the UCLA JCCC, such as Cancer and Stem Cell Biology, Signal Transduction and Therapeutics, and Tumor Immunology. Their teams will have access to UCLA JCCC shared resources which include Biostatistics, Analytical Support, and Evaluation; Genomics; and Molecular Screening – and are supported by other philanthropy.

Over the past five years, there have been 11 US Food and Drug Administration approved therapies that were developed through research conducted in UCLA JCCC labs. This is a remarkable achievement. Our success record, combined with the UC Pancreatic Cancer Consortium, makes this an especially powerful time to support pancreatic cancer research at the UCLA JCCC.