

IN CONVERSATION WITH

DR. GARY ULANER

*James & Pamela Muzzy Endowed Chair in Molecular Imaging and Therapy
Director of Molecular Imaging and Therapy
Hoag Family Cancer Institute*



“Hoag has been a remarkable institution to practice at, with a support staff and a cadre of other physicians that are incredibly professional. It’s no wonder patients get such great care here.”

You came to Hoag in September 2020. What inspired you to join Hoag?

The major attraction was the vision of the cancer center —specifically that of Dr. Burt Eisenberg. He knew molecular imaging and therapy would be of huge importance to the future of cancer research and care, and he wanted Hoag to be on the leading edge. When I told him what we would need to establish a program at Hoag, he made it happen. Vision like his is hard to find in both an institution and a cancer director. Before joining Hoag, I was an associate professor at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center and looking for the opportunity to lead and grow my own program. The executive, administrative and philanthropic support I have at Hoag made it the perfect fit to do just that.

How do you feel Hoag’s community hospital setting compares to that of an academic institution? What sets Hoag apart in your mind?

Hoag is a tertiary care center with experts to care for the most complex cases. Other community hospitals refer patients to us. This emphasis on outstanding patient care really sets Hoag apart. At the same time, I still feel like I have a research position, which is the hallmark of an academic institution. I’m running research projects with federal, local and philanthropic support. I publish and present nationally and internationally. Hoag is incredibly agile and activates the quality of projects started at large academic centers but at a much faster speed than academic institutions. Just a few months after I arrived, we went through all the regulatory committees to get four projects started right out of the gate.

What is your vision for building a comprehensive molecular imaging and therapy program at Hoag?

Our ultimate vision is to develop targeted diagnostic and therapeutic agents for every type of cancer. To start, we must select what’s most likely to be successful and invest our resources there. Right now, we have molecular imaging and therapy projects for patients with prostate cancer, breast cancer and myeloma. We’re constantly collaborating across Hoag and with other institutions to open new trials with novel agents. We recently hired our first nurse, and we’re hoping that, with multiple trials, we can hire more staff. We’re also expanding the program into one that educates physicians. Hoag is slated to begin an annual continuing education course focused on molecular imaging and therapy and PET/CT in February 2023. Radiologists, medical oncologists and nurses can come to Hoag and learn skills they can take back to their home hospitals. Pharmaceutical developers and scientists can participate so we can fill gaps in knowledge. The course will be open to anyone and will help grow Hoag as a center of excellence.

Within the last year, you’ve launched seven new clinical trials at Hoag. Can you update us on these trials? What progress are you making?

We have imaging trials for patients who are estrogen receptor-positive, which have already greatly impacted the lives of women at initial diagnosis and at expected recurrence. We also have an imaging trial for a prostate-specific antigen for 184 patients with prostate cancer. The FDA has approved the imaging agent, and it will become the standard of care for patients with prostate cancer. Our prostate-specific antigen-targeted therapy trial not only finds tumors but treats them with radiation. For patients with myeloma, our CD38-targeted imaging trial received an NIH grant, which is Hoag’s first R01 grant. Hoag is the institution at the center of the grant for this trial.

You were recently named the James & Pamela Muzzy Endowed Chair in Molecular Imaging and Therapy. Can you share with us the role philanthropy plays in your work?

The Muzzy family has been remarkably supportive of Hoag’s Molecular Imaging & Therapy Program and of me. They recently committed to funding a molecular imaging and therapy fellowship program as well. Their support allows us to recruit fellows and evaluate novel agents to determine which trials to focus on. I am incredibly grateful to have Hoag’s philanthropic community behind me. They add to the success of Hoag in general and molecular imaging and therapy specifically, which is a huge advantage over other institutions that don’t have the pilot funding or grants to run the same kind of projects. Through philanthropy, Hoag can bring the most promising agents into clinical trials.

What are you most looking forward to about training the next generation of cancer experts in this specialty thanks to the Muzzy family’s endowed fellowship?

I was thrilled to learn from experts at USC and Memorial Sloan Kettering and bring new knowledge to Hoag. To create the same opportunity for fellows as they grow in their careers is incredible. My hope is we’ll have this fellowship up and running by July 2023. Each year, we will graduate one to two trainees who will go on to academic institutions or private practices where they will exponentially improve the care patients receive. If they train other people, it’s almost like having kids and grandkids passing knowledge on.

What do you like to do when you are not at Hoag?

I’m married and have two children, Ilya and Anabel. My wife, Alena, and I are both swing dancers. There is an active dance community here in Southern California, but we are waiting for COVID to relent a bit more before going back to our passion.

Anything else you would like to share?

The breast cancer and urology teams have become not just collaborators but friends. We work together for the benefit of Hoag’s patients. I’d like to give a special shout-out to Beth Thomsen, our molecular imaging and therapy coordinator, who is both empathetic and professional. She elevates our program, and patients have nothing but the highest praise. I’d also like to thank Dr. Eisenberg and Dori Holnagel for having the vision to grow something new, which takes courage. I’m privileged Dr. Eisenberg reached out to me. Last but certainly not least, I’m grateful to the Muzzy family, whose philanthropic work has made immeasurable opportunities possible.

Education and Training

**Doctor of Medicine and Doctor of Philosophy,
Cancer Biology**

Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Radiology Residency and Nuclear Medicine Fellowship

University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA

Research Fellowship

Stanford University
Stanford, CA

Surgical Internship

The Johns Hopkins Hospital
Baltimore, MD

Board Certifications

American Board of Nuclear Medicine
American Board of Radiology

CONTACT

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