

A MESSAGE FROM OUR DIRECTOR



Dear Friends:

I hope you and your families are well as we approach the end of year. While we continue to navigate the twists and turns of the ever-changing pandemic landscape, I am deeply optimistic about the year ahead. Our campus vaccination rate is near 100% and we have developed one of the most advanced [genetic detection for COVID-19](#) on campus (read more about the COVID-19 tests in a recent [UCLA Newsroom](#) article [here](#)). We also have effective protocols in place to protect visitor, student, staff, and faculty health and well-being. These measures include requiring guests to provide proof of COVID-19 vaccination or a recent negative COVID-19 test and to adhere to our masking protocols. We are grateful to be able to welcome so many members of our extended community to our campus and continue to be extra vigilant about health and safety. I refer you to [UCLA Health for information addressing parent's questions on COVID-19 safety](#) and the [UCLA Health COVID-19 Vaccine Info Hub](#) for latest updates. I also bring your attention to the [COVID-19 resources](#) that CART compiled on our website since last winter.

A positive outcome of this challenging pandemic has been our utilization of virtual programs and platforms, which has allowed many more people to attend our events or be seen as patients at UCLA. CART will continue to offer much of our programming virtually, with more opportunities for research and clinical services available in-person and/or in a hybrid format. We invite you to attend our monthly Distinguished Lecture Series, available online, which brings in renowned autism researchers to share latest updates with our community. Please visit our [website](#) for more information.

I take this opportunity to highlight two of our outstanding, rising-star faculty at our center. [Rujuta B. Wilson, MD](#) and [Michael Gandal, MD, PhD](#) are two assistant professors transforming clinical care and research of autism and neurodevelopmental disorders. Dr. Wilson is a behavioral child neurologist seeing patients at the Child and Adult Neurodevelopmental (CAN) Clinic and the CARING Clinic at CART. Her focus and dedication to provide the highest quality of care and experience for her patients and their families has earned her recognition as a [2022 Super Doctor Rising Star](#) in the *LA Times* and, for the third consecutive year, [2021 Top Doctor](#) by *LA Magazine*. She also directs the [Wilson Motor Lab](#) at CART, focused on developing quantitative methods of motor phenotyping and evaluating motor development in infants at elevated risk for autism from early infancy through early childhood. Her work is funded by the National Institutes of Health, HRSA, and the Autism Science Foundation. She is a dedicated mentor and prioritizes her trainees who have made great strides in their own careers. In the last year, four trainees under her mentorship earned acceptance into their top choice graduate or residency training program. One of those trainees was a UCLA CART 2020 [Sigman Scholar](#) recipient and is now at Vanderbilt University Master of Special Education Program. Facing the challenges of the last year and a half, Dr. Wilson was able to transition her infant research program to remote and contactless operation, allowing her work to continue through the pandemic. Her efforts highlight how we can strive to make our research more accessible to participants and more representative of our diverse community. Find out more about Dr. Wilson's research featured recently by the Simons Foundation's [Spectrum News](#).

Dr. Michael Gandal, trained in clinical psychiatry and neurogenetics, specializes in treating neurodevelopmental, psychiatric disorders in adolescence and adulthood. He is a leading researcher in translational neuroscience and neurogenetics. Dr. Gandal directs [The Gandal Lab](#) at UCLA, while prioritizing mentorship of his trainees in his lab and at CART. Dr. Gandal's research was independently recognized as among the top 10 autism studies in 2018 by both *Autism Speaks* and *Spectrum*, and his work has been featured on national news outlets including *CNN*, *NPR*, and the *Washington Post*. This past year continued his immense impact on neuroscience as he was invited to guest edit an issue of *Biological Psychiatry* on "Disentangling Psychiatric Pologenicity." He also published a series of papers investigating the mechanisms through which neural-immune activation may contribute to developmental disorders. In this past year, his Bioinformatics graduate student, Cindy Wen, won the Early Career Oral Presentation Award at the World Congress of Psychiatric Genetics in 2021 for her work: "Large-scale, multi-ethnic resource of gene, isoform, and splicing regulation in the developing human brain." In 2020, Dr. Gandal himself was the recipient of the highest award honoring the top young investigator in psychiatric genetics from the International Society of Psychiatric Genetics, The Theodore Reich Young Investigator Award.

A key component of CART's continued success is philanthropic support from our community. Developing new faculty, such as Dr. Wilson and Dr. Gandal, and expanding research is essential to provide the foundation on which we hope to transform the diagnosis and understanding of autism spectrum disorders, so that we can build new innovative treatments. As you will also see later in this newsletter, we have been fortunate enough to fund pilot research projects that are bringing new investigators or research directions into the field of autism research. If you would like to learn more about how you can impact CART and help sustain us into the future, please contact: Christopher Carbado, Director of Development for UCLA Health Sciences at: ccarbado@mednet.ucla.edu or 310-562-6498.

This year, more than ever we need your support!

As always, we would love to hear from you – please contact me with any questions or messages for CART. My best wishes to you and your families.

Best regards,

Daniel H. Geschwind, MD, PhD
Gordon and Virginia MacDonald Distinguished Professor of Neurology, Psychiatry, and Human Genetics Director, UCLA Center for Autism Research and Treatment (CART)
Senior Associate Dean and Associate Vice Chancellor, Precision Health
David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA

HIGHLIGHTS

Meet Dr. Rajsekar "Raj" Rajaraman, new CART faculty



Dr. Rajsekar "Raj" Rajaraman is an Assistant Professor in Pediatric Neurology at the UCLA Mattel Children's Hospital. He completed his Pediatric Neurology residency, Clinical Neurophysiology fellowship, and Epilepsy fellowship training here at UCLA. A native of New Jersey, Dr. Rajaraman completed his pediatrics residency at the Unterberg Children's Hospital at Monmouth Medical Center in New Jersey. During his pediatric residency, his exposure to seizures and the effects that epilepsy has on the patient and family led to him pursuing a career in pediatric epileptology at UCLA.

[Read more >](#)

UCLA CART Announces 2021 Pilot Grant Recipients



UCLA CART announces recipients of the 2021 CART Pilot Grant program to two research teams. The first team includes Dr. Connie Kasari, Dr. Cathy Lord, and Dr. Alexandra Sturm for their project titled: "Management of reproductive health and the impact of menstruation-related hormone change on autism-related impairment among autistic women." The second research team includes Dr. Patricia Renno and Dr. Amanda Gulsrud for their project titled: "Treating Externalizing Behavior Problems in Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Investigating a Novel Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Approach."

[Read more >](#)

UCLA CART Announces 2021 Sigman Scholars Recipients



UCLA CART has announced this year's Sigman Scholars, an annual summer research award given to UCLA undergraduates. The 2021 Sigman Scholars are Beza Ayalew and Zoe Day. The Sigman Scholars research program is for UCLA undergraduate students interested in pursuing a career focused on autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The program provides students with a rigorous research position in a CART lab, working under the mentorship of CART's exceptional faculty. The program is supported by the Sigman Scholars Fund at CART.

[Read more >](#)

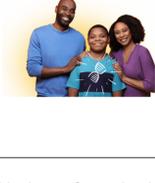
RESEARCH UPDATES

Join SPARK for Autism – and help advance autism research



SPARK is the largest genetic study of its kind, with the goal to speed up research to improve and advance our understanding of autism! If interested in participating sign up by following this link: <https://sparkforautism.org/?code=ucla> and hitting the "Join Us" button in the top right-hand corner to get started! For any further questions or concerns please reach out to: rlucio@mednet.ucla.edu and/or diage@mednet.ucla.edu.

Updates from the Kasari Lab



In recently published paper, researchers from the Kasari Lab looked at the school-based special education services provided to students with autism compared to those with intellectual disabilities and learning disabilities. Sturm, Williams, & Kasari (2021) found that Hispanic and Latinx autistic students in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) receive the fewest school-based services of any ethnicity group, and White autistic students are more likely to receive more special education services than any other group.

[Read more >](#)

New study from the SCAN Lab



The SCAN Lab at UCLA is recruiting for a new study, Sensory Regulation Development, which will examine how sensory processing and social skills develop in the brain. We are seeking participants ages 8-15 who: 1) are typically developing; or 2) are on the autism spectrum.

[Read more >](#)

Examining Work and Physical Health, Personal Well-being, and Influence of Siblings Helps Researchers Understand Adult Outcomes in Autism



The Lord Lab's ongoing work to understand adult outcomes in autism and to identify factors that promote positive outcomes is highlighted in several new articles. These studies used data collected over thirty years to examine work and physical health outcomes, personal well-being, and the influence of sibling activities on autistic adults. We found that participation in any work activities was associated with increased well-being for autistic adults (Clarke, Sterrett, & Lord, 2021). Regarding physical health, we found many autistic adults were prescribed psychiatric medications for long periods of time. We also found higher rates of obesity in autistic adults compared to typical adults (Byrne et al., 2021).

[Read more >](#)

College to Career is meeting need of autistic young adults



An estimated 80 percent of autistic adults are unemployed or under employed. In an effort to meet the needs of the growing population of autistic young adults, the UCLA College to Career study led by Drs. Amanda Gulsrud and Elizabeth Laugeson, aims to test the effectiveness of the PEERS® for Careers 20-week training program. The program teaches autistic young adults the necessary skills for obtaining and maintaining a job, and helps to facilitate internship and/or employment opportunities. Since the start of the study, the employment team has connected with over 150 community partners and individuals and amassed over 80 internship and employment opportunities for our young adults. The study has enrolled over 75 young adults to date and is currently enrolling individuals for our final group that will begin in January 2022. To learn more about this study and participant eligibility, please [click here](#).

UCLA CART SYMPOSIUM

Advances in Autism 2022

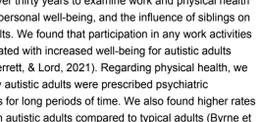
Save the date
APRIL 29, 2022

Consider donating to UCLA CART this holiday season!

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