Holiday Letter to Our Colleagues and Friends

Raymond Sawaya

Happy New Year! Here’s a review of the past year’s events in the Department of Neurosurgery.

We began with the 19th annual Milam E. Leavens Lecture, honoring Dr. Leavens, the first chief of the M.D. Anderson Neurosurgery Service. Titled “Translational Neuro-Oncology: The Long March of the Translators,” it was presented January 16, 2015, by Manfred Westphal, Prof. Dr. med., Director of Neurosurgery, at the University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA.

The 20th annual Milam E. Leavens Lecture, titled “Developing New Approaches to Brain Tumor Therapy” will be presented Friday, January 15, 2016, by Dr. Henry Brem, Director, Dept. of Neurosurgery, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD.

2015 marks the 25th Anniversary of the establishment of the Department of Neurosurgery, to be celebrated at a Gala event on January 28, 2016, at Houston’s River Oaks Country Club. See page 3 of this newsletter for a special message about this anniversary.

Dr. Franco DeMonte directed the Fourth Annual Nicholson Lecture in Surgical Neuroanatomy and Research, with Dr. Daniel Prevedello, at the Nicholson Microsurgical and Endoscopic Center for Clinical Applications (MECCA) Laboratory at Baylor College of Medicine in May. In August, he directed the Congress of Neurological Surgeons (CNS) 3-D Surgical Anatomy Course for Senior Residents at the MECCA lab. And he conducted the course “Endoscopic Endonasal Surgery of the Cranial Base and Pituitary Fossa,” at the Univ. of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, in November.

...Dr. Sherise Ferguson became the lead “Super User” in our department for the implementation of the Epic electronic medical record software.

Dr. Amy Heimberger reviewed grant proposals at the NIH/CNBT Study Section in February in San Francisco, and in Washington, D.C. in October. In March, she became Chair of the Target Identification & Agent Selection Committee of the NBDA-NBTS International Adaptive Trial for GBM. In April, she obtained her Certificate of Completion of the Academic Medical Department Leadership course at the Univ. of Texas School of Public Health. In July, she and Jun Wei, Ph.D., filed a patent along with Arcturus Therapeutics and M.D. Anderson Cancer Center for “MIR-124 compositions for immune modulatory therapeutics.” She was Visiting Professor at the University of Florida at Gainesville in May, at the University of California at San Diego in August, and at the University of Alabama in November. In addition, as lead PI of M.D. Anderson’s Glioblastoma Moon Shot program, with Co-PIs Frederick Lang and John de Groot (from Neuro-Oncology), she received $1.64 million for the period 9/1/2015 to 8/31/2016. She also obtained $2 million (over 5 years) from the Ben and Catherine Ivy Foundation for “Utilizing a small molecule and nanoparticle formulated STAT3 inhibitor to stop the process of tumorigenesis and tumor-mediated immune suppression in a phase I/II clinical trial with unique correlative biomarkers of potential clinical response,” as well as a CPRIT grant of $888,429 to study “Nanoparticle-targeted STAT3 immune expression.”

Dr. Suyun Huang became a member of the NIH Tumor Cell Biology Study Section, Center for Scientific Review, for the term 7/1/15 to 6/30/19.

Dr. Frederick Lang served as Chair and Host for M.D. Anderson’s 11th Annual Brain Cancer SPORE Mid-Winter Workshop, in Houston in January. In June, he submitted a U.S. patent application for “Oncolytic adenovirus armed with therapeutic genes.” As a Co-PI with Amy Heimberger, he will benefit from the $1.64 million awarded to M.D. Anderson’s Glioblastoma Moon Shot program for the period 9/1/15 to 8/31/16.

Dr. Joseph McCarty served as Visiting Professor at the University of Texas Medical Branch, Division of Neurosurgery, Galveston, TX, in September.

Dr. Ian McCutcheon served as Visiting Professor at the Univ. of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, TX, in September and at the Univ. of Illinois at Chicago in December.

Dr. Sujit Prabhu moderated two sessions at the Educational Course on Contemporary Management of Intracranial Gliomas, Asian Congress of Neurological Surgeons, in Novosibirsk, Russian Federation, in August. He was also Co-Chair of the Indian Society for Neuro-Oncology’s session on Progress and Contributions to Neuro-Oncology from India, held at the annual Society for Neuro-Oncology Meeting in San Antonio, TX, in...
David Sandberg MD  
Associate Professor  
Pediatric Brain Tumors

Sherise Ferguson MD  
Assistant Professor  
Primary & Metastatic Brain and Spinal Tumors; Pituitary Tumors

Shan M. Raza MD  
Assistant Professor  
Skull Base Neoplasms  
Skull Base Endoscopy

Claudio A. Tatsui MD  
Assistant Professor  
Spinal Tumors and Primary and Metastatic Brain Tumors

Ashwin Viswanathan MD  
Assistant Professor  
Cancer Pain Management, Epilepsy, Neuro-Oncology

RESEARCH FACULTY

Oliver Bogler PhD  
Professor, Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs  
Gene Expression, Signal Transduction, Apoptosis-Interacting Proteins, & Platinum Response in Brain Tumors

Suyun Huang MD, PhD  
Professor  
Metalloproteinases, Transcription Factors, Necrosis Formation in Gliomas, Biology of Brain Metastases

Dima Suki PhD  
Professor & Director of Protocol Development and Data Management  
Epidemiology & Outcomes Assessment, Metastatic Brain Tumors, Health Services Research

Joseph McCarty PhD  
Associate Professor  
TGFβ Activation & Signaling in Gliomagenesis

Jun Wei PhD  
Assistant Professor  
Immunotherapy for Malignant Brain Tumors

Khiatri Latha PhD  
Instructor  
Proteomics in Treatment of Malignant Brain Tumors

November. Moreover, he received $7,000 from Monteris Medical, Inc. to maintain the “NeuroBlate® retrospective registry.”

Dr. Ganesh Rao served as the treasurer of the CNS Executive Committee’s meetings in January, April, June, and November. He directed the Lab Session at M.D. Anderson’s 9th Annual Kumphler Functional Neuroanatomy Seminar in Houston in February. He also became Director of Baylor College of Medicine’s Neurosurgery Residents Program. And he directed the Society of Neurological Surgeons Boot Camp Fundamental Skills Course at Baylor College of Medicine in July.

Dr. Shaan Raza was awarded first prize in the Oncology Category of the British Medical Association’s Medical Book Awards for 2014 for Controversies in Neuro-Oncology: Best Evidence Medicine for Brain Tumor Surgery. He also served as an Instructor for the MINTOS Cadaver Course at the MECCA Laboratory at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston in April.

Dr. Laurence Rhines was a panelist for “Vertebral Column Tumors,” at the 83rd AANS Meeting, Washington, DC, 5/5/15. He received the Alumni Achievement Award from the Dept. of Neurosurgery, Johns Hopkins Medical School, Baltimore, MD, in June. And he attended the Faculty Leadership Academy at M.D. Anderson in October.

Dr. Raymond Sawaya was honored with a named lecture, the “Inaugural Dr. Raymond Sawaya Lecture,” presented by Ziya L. Gokaslan, MD, at Baylor College of Medicine, in January. He was the 2015 winner of the AANS/CNS Joint Section on Tumors Distinguished Service Award, presented at the 11th Biennial Satellite Symposium of the Section on Tumors in Washington, DC, in May (he is only the 5th recipient of this award during the Section’s 30-year history). He also was Keynote Speaker at the School of Medicine’s Hooding Ceremony for the Lebanese American University Faculty of Medicine at the Byblos Campus, Beirut, Lebanon, in June.

Dr. Dima Suki was appointed Associate Chair of the M.D. Anderson Institutional Review Board. She is a continuing Member of the M.D. Anderson Research Faculty Appointment Committee.

Dr. Claudio Tatsui was a panelist for “MRI-Guided Laser Ablation in Neurosurgery” at the Texas Association of Neurological Surgeons (TANS) Annual Meeting, Galveston, TX, in February. He was also the inaugural winner of the Brian D. Silber Award for the abstract “Laser Interstitial Thermotherapy as an Alternative to Separation Surgery in the Management of Spinal Metastases,” at the AANS/CNS Joint Section on Tumors meeting in Washington, DC, in May.

Dr. Ashwin Viswanathan received $72,000 from the American Cancer Society in February (for 1/1/15-12/31/16) to study “Minimally invasive cordotomy for refractory cancer pain.”

Dr. Jun Wei was promoted from Instructor to Assistant Professor. He has a strong interest and research background in immunotherapy for malignant gliomas.

Dr. Jeffrey Weinberg became President-Elect of the TANS for 2016. He was Co-Chair of “Together in Hope: A Conference for Brain Tumor Patients & Their Families,” in Houston in April, and he served as Instructor for the Society of Neurological Surgeons Boot Camp, Fundamental Skills Course, Baylor College of Medicine in July. In August, he was elected to the M.D. Anderson Physicians Referral Service Faculty Compensation & Benefit Advisory Committee, for a 2-year term. He also was Co-PI on a $76,000 grant from the Radiology Society of North America to study “Radioimmunocytometry in glioblastoma: Decoding the imaging genomic landscape and heterogeneity” (for 7/1/15 to 6/30/16).


New Clinical Fellows this year (7/15-6/16) were Drs. Sarah Garber (Univ. of Utah), Peleg Horowitz (Brigham & Women’s Hosp./Harvard Univ.), Jonathan Thomas (Baylor Coll. of Med.), Brian Williams (Univ. of Virginia), and Tiffany Hodges (7/15-6/17, Duke Univ.). Finishing their fellowships in 2015 were Drs. Edjah Ndumon (Emory Univ., Atlanta, GA), Vincent DiNapoli (Univ. of Cincinnati, OH), and Salvatore Zavarella (N. Shore-Long Is. Jewish Health System, Old Westbury, NY).

Visiting Scientists in 2015 were Li, Yi, MD, Chen Yue, MD, and Sun-Ho Lee, MD, from the People’s Republic of China, and there were 19 Postdoctoral Fellows in our department.

We thank our friends Kyle C. and Elaine Brooks, Paul Orefice, the Dr. Marnie Rose Foundation, the Broach Foundation, the Nicholson Family, the Apache Corporation, the Silverman Foundation, Ben & Catherine Ivy, the Pappas Family, the Dore Fund, and the Chip & Susan Bonner Fund. We appreciate their support, which has been a great asset to brain tumor research in our department.

**NEWSLETTER COMMITTEE**

David M. Wildrick, PhD - Editor  
Raymond Sawaya, MD  
Catherine Pettinos, MBA

**Office address:**  
Department of Neurosurgery-unit 442  
The University of Texas  
M.D. Anderson Cancer Center  
1515 Holcombe Blvd  
Houston, TX 77030  
Tel: 713-792-2400  
Fax: 713-794-4950  
http://tinyurl.com/mda-neuro
Dear Friends,

As a wise friend once said, “Never miss an opportunity to celebrate!” So this 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Department of Neurosurgery at MD Anderson Cancer Center is as good an occasion as any to do just that. To celebrate is also to identify the many accomplishments and milestones that were reached, to recognize the team that dedicated itself with excellence to the mission, to voice appreciation and gratitude to the many who supported our goals and progress, and to look to the future with confidence and hope.

The department was established on September 1, 1990, and on that day it listed only five employees! Today, there are 90 employees, and this remarkable growth mirrors that of our entire institution. More patients with neurological tumors are seen and operated on in this department than at any other institution in the country. Procedures that were never previously performed have been effectively devised, and numerous patients with presumably inoperable tumors have had their tumors successfully removed. Along the way, there have been over 100,000 patient encounters, nearly 30,000 operations, and the creation of a well-developed infrastructure. Equally important, are the fundamental discoveries made in the laboratories and the clinics, the over 1,000 scientific publications produced, the nearly $50 million in competitive grants secured, and the over 150 neurosurgeons trained and who currently practice throughout the globe.

It is well understood that great accomplishments are the work of dedicated individuals who bring commitment and excellence to their daily activities. This is particularly true for the 18 faculty members, 10 advanced practice nurses, the administrative staff, and the dozen trainees who collectively represent the most sophisticated expert work force, tackling the most difficult aspects of neurological tumors. Through their individual leadership, their sense of ownership, and their superior work ethic, each member of this work force has earned the admiration and respect of the others. All of them deserve our admiration and our recognition.

In today’s interconnectedness, many of our accomplishments have benefitted from the support of the institution, of our colleagues in related disciplines, and of our friends in the community. As the department has grown, resources in the form of positions, space, and technology were continuously provided by our institutional leaders. A prime example would be the $9 million intraoperative MRI BrainSuite. This continuous form of support under three consecutive administrations, reflects positively on the principles that guide our strategic institutional initiatives.

Our colleagues in Neuro-Oncology, Central Nervous System Radiation Oncology, Neuroanesthesia, Neuropathology, Neuroradiology, Surgical Oncology, Head and Neck Surgery, Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery, Rehabilitation Medicine, Pain Medicine, and basic laboratory research have all been instrumental in promoting our patient care activities and our discoveries. This concept of multidisciplinary and collaborative care has had a direct impact on the quality and the success of our enterprise.

And last but not least, are the many friends who have understood the magnitude of the challenges that are faced daily by our patients, as well as the elusive nature of the diseases many of them face, who stepped forward in support of our mission to eliminate neurological tumors as a threat to patients’ lives. This support has taken a multitude of forms, such as grants for research, equipment for the operating room or for the laboratory, financial infusion for clinical trials, or other forms of philanthropic backing. Our words of appreciation cannot sufficiently express our gratitude for their partnership.

As we celebrate this remarkable milestone, we are well positioned to face the future, with the knowledge that we can create an integrated community that is greater than the sum of its individual components, and that you, our friends, will be with us on this journey.

Sincerely,

Raymond Sawaya, MD, Professor and Chairman