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U.S. News & World Report: UC San Diego #1 for Gastroenterology and Hepatology Research

Retired Navy Lieutenant, who is now in cancer remission and on liver transplant list, is an example of how translational research leads to life-saving approaches and treatments

U.S. News & World Report named University of California San Diego School of Medicine a top global university and ranked the divisions of Gastroenterology and Hepatology [#1 in the world for research](#). For patients like Norlan Reyes, this means world-class care close to home.

It was during an annual, physical exam 14 years ago, when Reyes, now 71, discovered he had liver disease. The retired U.S. Navy Lieutenant was diagnosed with cirrhosis, a late-stage scarring (fibrosis) of the liver. “I felt healthy and even ran four miles a few times a week, so it was a bit surprising when I got the diagnosis.”

Reyes received care at UC San Diego Health, the region’s only academic medical center, where he was enrolled in several clinical trials over the years.

“We’ve taken care of Mr. Reyes for more than 10 years, and through his participation in these trials, we’ve been able to manage his cirrhosis and ensure that it did not worsen over time,” said Rohit Loomba, MD, professor of medicine in the Division of Gastroenterology, director of Hepatology and director of the Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD) Research Center at UC San Diego School of Medicine.

One study used conventional ultrasound versus investigational magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to screen and monitor liver disease.

After the investigational MRI, Loomba found a suspicious spot on Reyes’ liver that was not seen on the conventional ultrasound. He was diagnosed with hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), a primary malignancy of the liver that occurs predominantly in patients with underlying chronic liver disease and cirrhosis.

“It was only because of his participation in the clinical trial that he had access to an investigational MRI that resulted in his earlier diagnosis,” said Loomba.

Reyes was grateful: “Had I not been under UC San Diego Health’s care, my lesion might not have been detected until it was at a more advanced stage. The clinical trial saved my life.”

Reyes is now in remission and on the liver transplant list.

“Patients like Mr. Reyes have a team of UC San Diego medical staff and researchers behind them, making discoveries in the lab that lead to life-saving treatments and approaches in the hospital setting,” said William Sandborn, MD, professor of medicine at UC San Diego School of Medicine, chief of the Division of Gastroenterology and director of the Inflammatory Bowel Disease Center at UC San Diego Health.

The recent U.S. News & World Report ranking is based on a variety of factors, including research reputation, total number of research publications and the impact of the research publications.

“This remarkable recognition would not be possible without the incredible team efforts among many individuals. We work together every day to make the world a better place,” said Sandborn.

“To paint a broad picture, it starts with a funded study, tireless work in the lab to determine evidence-based results and publishing those results in high-impact journals, like Science, Nature and the New England Journal of Medicine. Then, our findings lead to new and effective treatments and help shape guidelines for patient care in areas like colon cancer, inflammatory bowel disease, celiac disease and NAFLD. It’s very rewarding.”



Rohit Loomba, MD, professor of medicine in the Division of Gastroenterology, director of Hepatology and director of the Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD) Research Center at UC San Diego School of Medicine.



William Sandborn, MD, professor of medicine at UC San Diego School of Medicine, chief of the Division of Gastroenterology and director of the

For example, Samir Gupta, MD, professor of medicine and Siddharth Singh, MD, assistant professor of medicine at UC San Diego School of Medicine, have developed screening guidelines for the detection of early colorectal cancer and for the treatment of inflammatory bowel disease; and Denise Kalmaz, MD, and Mary Lee Krinsky, MD, both professors of medicine at UC San Diego School of Medicine, helped develop guidelines for iron deficiency and for the optimal use of endoscopy and colonoscopy in gastrointestinal diseases through their research.

Inflammatory Bowel Disease Center at UC San Diego Health.

UC San Diego School of Medicine researchers have led clinical trials resulting in seven approved medications for ulcerative colitis, Crohn's disease and NAFLD since 2012.

In addition, Sandborn, Loomba, David Brenner, MD, vice chancellor of UC San Diego Health Sciences, and Bernd Schnabl, MD, professor of medicine and director of the San Diego Digestive Disease Research Center at UC San Diego School of Medicine, were recognized by U.S. News & World Report for being in the top 1 percent in the nation for impact of their research studies published in 2019. Combined, these four physician-scientists published 137 research papers that year.

"As an academic medical center, we are dedicated to research that translates into improved health care," said Brenner. "These recent accomplishments are further evidence that UC San Diego performs translational research, patient care and instruction at the highest level."



David Brenner, MD, vice chancellor of UC San Diego Health Sciences.

Reyes now sits on UC San Diego's NAFLD Research Center Patient Advisory Board.

"I am committed to not only providing my input as a patient-advocate, but also to helping researchers partner with different communities here in San Diego to disseminate information and help reduce rates of advanced liver disease and HCC," said Reyes. "One of my favorite sayings is, 'Do what you can today because tomorrow is only a dream,' but I know that I will have many tomorrows thanks so the entire team at UC San Diego Health."

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