

UC San Diego

UC San Diego News Center

By Erika Johnson

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In gratitude for his cancer care, Robert J. Shillman recently donated \$1 million to support the clinical and research mission of the Bone and Marrow Transplantation Program at UC San Diego Health. Photographed by Melissa Jacobs prior to the pandemic.

‘Doctor of Philanthropy’ Gives \$1 Million Gift toward Blood Cancer Research

‘Doctor Bob’ and ‘Doctor Ball’ converse warmly in a way that only friends who have overcome life-changing obstacles can. It was three and a half years ago when Robert J. Shillman, Ph.D.—known as “Dr. Bob”—began experiencing strange symptoms. When he was diagnosed with lymphoma, a cancer that affects the infection-fighting cells of the immune system, he began a nationwide search for treatment that led him to Edward D. Ball, M.D. at Moores Cancer Center at UC San Diego Health.

“I was fortunate to have been referred to Dr. Ball, a prominent hematologist-oncologist and director of the Blood and Marrow Transplant (BMT) Program at UC San Diego Health, when I was first diagnosed with lymphoma three years ago, and I’m alive today because of his care,” said Shillman, who is founder, chairman and chief culture officer of Cognex Corporation. “Doctor Ball is not only a fine researcher, and physician, but he is also a very compassionate man who truly cares about his patients.”

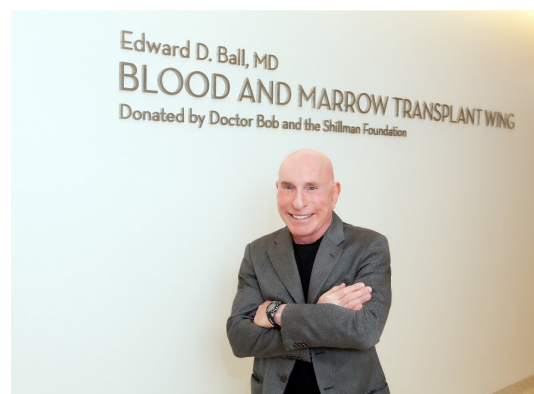
In gratitude for that care, Shillman recently donated \$1 million to support the clinical and research missions of the BMT Program. The UC San Diego Health and Sharp HealthCare’s joint Blood and Marrow Transplantation Program is the largest blood and marrow transplant program in San Diego, and one of the largest in California. Doctor Bob’s gift funds the Robert J. Shillman Cancer Scholar, a four-year award that helped recruit a prominent physician-scientist, Fotios Asimakopoulos, M.D., to Moores Cancer Center. This gift contributes to the Campaign for UC San Diego.

“We thank Dr. Bob for his generous support of the Blood and Marrow Transplantation Program, and his investment in the future of cancer care and cell therapy at UC San Diego,” said Chancellor Pradeep K. Khosla. “Through his philanthropy, we are pleased to welcome prestigious physician-scientist Fotios Asimakopoulos to our campus, who adds a new dimension to UC San Diego’s groundbreaking immunotherapy research.”

A blood and marrow transplant replaces damaged cells in patients whose normal blood cells have been crowded out by cancerous cells. BMT is often preceded by high-dose chemotherapy for blood cancers that include leukemia, lymphomas, myeloma and more. Patients are offered numerous treatment pathways as well as the opportunity to take part in clinical trials that are not widely available elsewhere.

“Shillman’s generous gift permits us to expand research, in particular to hire a very impressive and important faculty member, Dr. Fotios Asimakopoulos, who’s doing groundbreaking research in the immunotherapies,” said Dr. Ball, who is also the Garner Family Chancellor’s Endowed Chair in Blood and Marrow Transplant. “He adds another dimension and depth to our programs with his very strong laboratory research background, which will translate into more clinical trials in the areas of myeloma, lymphoma and leukemia.”

Asimakopoulos joined UC San Diego Health in July 2019 to begin his tenure as associate professor in residence in the Department of Medicine. Previously, he served as associate professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His research efforts focus on speeding momentum in the field of



Shillman, who goes by “Dr. Bob,” dedicated the Bone and Marrow Transplantation wing to Dr. Ted Ball, whom he credits for saving his life after being diagnosed with lymphoma. Photo Credit: Melissa Jacobs

myeloma research, which is the second most common blood cancer. Through immunotherapy innovations, his vision is to provide new hope to patients and contribute research toward finding a cure.

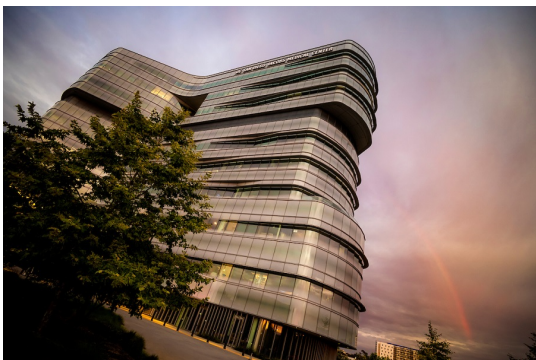
“I am profoundly grateful for the support by Dr. Bob; his gift is vital in our efforts to expand the myeloma and immunotherapy programs at UC San Diego,” said Asimakopoulos. “And for me personally, this award was essential for my decision to come to this fantastic institution. It’s an exciting and challenging time, yet we believe that our work will contribute to finding a cure for this common and devastating disease.”

Doctor of philanthropy

Shillman earned a doctorate in electrical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the field of Artificial Intelligence. In addition, he has also received three honorary doctorates, one from Northeastern University in Boston, the second from Waseda University in Tokyo and the third from The Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa. But instead of touting his many professional accomplishments, Shillman tells everyone that his Ph.D. now stands for “Doctor of Philanthropy” to reflect his passion in helping to make the world a better place for everyone.

According to Shillman, he designates gifts to individuals who are making a difference.

“I give based on personal relationships,” he explained. “After knowing Dr. Ball for a year or so, I recognized how special he is....not only a fine physician and researcher, but a real sweetheart.”



The sixth floor of Jacobs Medical Center at UC San Diego is largely dedicated to the Blood and Marrow Transplantation Program and features a full-floor air-filtration system to support immune-compromised patients. Photo Credit: Erik Jepsen/Publications

In a demonstration of respect and appreciation, Shillman requested that the BMT wing in Jacobs Medical Center be named the Edward D. Ball, M.D. BMT Wing, rather than the Robert J. Shillman BMT Wing. His goal is to acknowledge the work done by Ball and his team, and inspire others to consider supporting people who impact their lives in meaningful ways.

The BMT Unit at Jacobs Medical Center provides a unique healing space for those recovering from a bone or marrow transplant. An entire floor is dedicated to patient care and comfort, with private rooms and space for family members. Patients typically have to remain in isolation for several weeks due to a compromised immune system, but with a full-floor, pressurized aseptic air-filtration system, patients can freely leave their rooms to walk around when appropriate, visit with loved ones and enjoy views of terraced gardens.

For Dr. Ball, it is the support toward continued research, and the friendship, that means the most. “He’s a friend; we are on a first-name basis—Dr. Ted, Dr. Bob,” he said. “I can’t thank Dr. Bob enough for his generosity, and I can assure you we will put it to good use. We look forward to working with him very closely for many years.”

This gift contributes to the [Campaign for UC San Diego](#)—a university-wide comprehensive fundraising effort concluding in 2022. Together with philanthropic partners, UC San Diego will continue its nontraditional path toward revolutionary ideas, unexpected answers, lifesaving discoveries and planet-changing impact. To learn more, visit campaign.ucsd.edu.

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