

2026 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE CENTERS Research Symposium

AGENDA

1:00 - 1:50PM	Registration & Poster Set Up
1:50 - 2:00PM	Welcome & Opening Remarks
2:00 - 2:20PM	Leveraging the Short-lived African Turquoise Killifish as a Tool to Uncover Interventions for Age-related Cognitive Decline Bérénice A. Benayoun, PhD Associate Professor, Departments of Gerontology, Cancer Biology, Pharmacology and Pharmaceutical Sciences USC
2:20 - 2:40PM	ACE, Increased Macrophage Function, and Prevention of Alzheimer's Disease Kenneth Bernstein, MD Professor, Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine Cedars Sinai
2:40 - 3:00PM	Regulators of Tau Proteostasis Revealed by CRISPR Screening in Human Neurons Avi J. Samelson, PhD Assistant Professor, Departments of Neurology and Biological Chemistry UCLA
3:00 - 3:20PM	Multi-modal Choroid Plexus Pathology in Aging and Alzheimer's Disease Huixin Xu, PhD Assistant Professor, Department of Neurobiology and Behavior UCI
3:20 - 3:40PM	Epigenomic Regulation of Microglia in Alzheimer's Disease Johannes Schlachetzki, MD Assistant Professor, Department of Neurosciences UCSD
3:40 - 4:10PM	Poster Session
4:10 - 4:30PM	Targeting Synuclein for Alzheimer's Disease Robert Rissman, PhD W.M. Keck Endowed Chair in Medicine; Professor, Department of Physiology and Neuroscience; Director, Neuroscience Translational Research Division USC
4:30 - 4:50PM	What Faces Reveal: Clues to Neurodegenerative Disorders Golnaz Yadollahkhales, MD Assistant Professor, Department of Neurology Cedars Sinai
4:50 - 5:10PM	Discovery of an ApoE4-Targeted Small-Molecule SirT1 Enhancer as a Candidate Drug for Treatment of AD Varghese John, PhD Professor, Department of Neurology UCLA
5:10 - 5:30PM	Limbic Predominant Age Related TDP-43 Encephalopathy Seyed Ahmad Sajjadi, MD, PhD Associate Professor, Departments of Neurology and Pathology UCI
5:30 - 5:50PM	Vascular Health and Cognition in Individuals at Risk for Alzheimer's Disease Katherine Bangen, PhD Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry UCSD
5:50 - 6:00PM	Closing Remarks
6:00 - 6:30PM	Reception and Poster Session
6:30 - 7:30PM	Dinner

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BASIC SCIENCE SPEAKERS



BÉRÉNICE A. BENAYOUN, PHD | USC

Bérénice Benayoun, PhD lab's research focuses on 'omic' remodeling with aging in vertebrates, and how these changes interact with overlooked cues such as biological sex. Her lab is also one of the pioneering labs in the development of a naturally short-lived vertebrate as a new model for aging research, the African turquoise killifish *Nothobranchius furzeri*.



KENNETH BERNSTEIN, MD | CEDARS SINAI

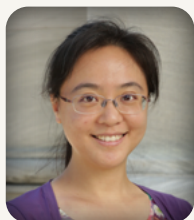
Dr. Bernstein began his research training as a Postdoctoral Fellow in the NIH Laboratory of Immunology, investigating the molecular biology of rabbit immunoglobulin expression. Between 1985 and 1987, in a combined administrative and scientific role at NIH, he cloned the gene encoding angiotensin converting enzyme (ACE). He joined Emory University's faculty in 1987 before relocating to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in 2008. His research has focused on ACE, angiotensin II, and the renin-angiotensin system.

Key contributions include cloning the angiotensin II AT1 receptor gene and developing novel ACE mouse models through targeted homologous recombination, initiated during a 1993 sabbatical with Dr. Mario Capecchi. These models have advanced understanding of ACE's role in reproduction, metabolism, renal function, blood pressure, Alzheimer's disease, and immune response. Dr. Bernstein has been recognized with the AHA Novartis Prize for Hypertension Research, the AHA Basic Science Prize, and was named an AHA Distinguished Scientist in 2013.



AVI J. SAMELSON, PHD | UCLA

Dr. Samelson received his PhD in Molecular and Cellular Biology from UC Berkeley, where he studied how the ribosome affects protein folding and misfolding in the laboratory of Dr. Susan Marqusee. He completed his postdoctoral training with Dr. Martin Kampmann at UCSF's Institute for Neurodegenerative Diseases, where he developed CRISPR-based genetic modifier screens in human iPSC-derived neurons to study tauopathies. During this work, he identified a novel tau E3 ubiquitin ligase and uncovered links between oxidative stress and tau proteasomal processing. His lab now focuses on understanding mechanisms of protein aggregation in neurodegenerative disease.



HUIXIN XU, PHD | UCI

Huixin Xu recently joined UCI Department of Neurobiology and Behavior following her training at Harvard Medical School and Boston Children's Hospital. She studies the choroid plexus, a secretory epithelium of the brain that produces the majority of the cerebrospinal fluid and forms the blood-cerebrospinal fluid barrier of the brain. Her postdoctoral work discovered a new function of the choroid plexus as a central conductor of brain inflammation that actively coordinates the entry of peripheral immune cells and the activities of resident immune cells with barrier integrity. She now studies the roles of choroid plexus in brain aging and Alzheimer's disease, with the goal of understanding how the choroid plexus shapes the brain microenvironment and supports brain health.



JOHANNES SCHLACHETZKI, MD | UCSD

Johannes Schlachetzki, MD, is a physician-scientist at UC San Diego. Trained as a neurologist, Dr. Schlachetzki integrates clinical insight with advanced genomic and multi-omic approaches to understand how microglia, the brain's innate immune cells, contribute to neurodegenerative processes. His laboratory focuses particularly on the transcriptional regulation of microglial states, decoding how gene regulatory networks shift during aging and disease. By combining single-cell technologies, epigenomics, and experimental models, his work builds a mechanistic foundation for targeting microglial biology in Alzheimer's disease.

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CLINICAL SPEAKERS



ROBERT RISSMAN, PHD | USC

Dr. Robert Rissman is founding Director of the Neuroscience Translational Research Division (NTRD) at the USC Epstein Family Alzheimer's Therapeutic Research Institute (ATRI). Concurrently, Dr. Rissman also serves as the Biomarker Unit Lead for the Alzheimer's Clinical Trials Consortium (ACTC) and the Biomarker PI of the USC Alzheimer's Disease Research Center. Using biobanked human specimens and animal and cell models, Dr. Rissman's basic science research aims to identify and validate plasma biomarkers for Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders (ADRD) to better understand mechanisms of neurodegeneration and streamline clinical trial recruitment.

His research division is focused on understanding how synucleinopathy and other common comorbidities in AD can be identified and treated. Work from Dr. Rissman's lab has led to the validation of plasma biomarkers that predict AD brain neuropathology and progression of dementia. Through analysis of plasma-derived extracellular vesicles, his research group was the first to demonstrate that TDP-43 protein within astrocyte extracellular vesicles can identify Limbic-predominant age-related TDP-43 encephalopathy (LATE).



GOLNAZ YADOLLAHIKHALES, MD | CEDARS SINAI

Golnaz Yadollahikhales, MD, is Associate Director of the Behavioral Neurology Fellowship Program. She completed her medical training at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, her neurology residency at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and a behavioral neurology fellowship at the University of California, San Francisco. Her research integrates clinical neurology with advanced neuroimaging, including functional MRI, to identify biomarkers in Alzheimer's disease and dementia with Lewy bodies. As an investigator in multiple observational studies and clinical trials, her work focuses on translating imaging and cognitive findings into clinically meaningful diagnostic tools, with a particular emphasis on face processing as a novel biomarker in neurodegeneration.



VARGHESE JOHN, PHD | UCLA

Professor John is a medicinal chemist with more than 20 years of experience leading small-molecule drug discovery and hit-to-lead optimization programs in both the pharmaceutical industry and academia. In 2014, he established the UCLA Drug Discovery Laboratory within the Department of Neurology, where the lab is part of the Mary S. Easton Center for Alzheimer's Disease Research and Care. He has led multidisciplinary teams focused on drug discovery and structure-based small-molecule hit-to-lead optimization, advancing multiple compounds into clinical testing for Alzheimer's disease.



SEYED AHMAD SAJJADI, MD, PHD | UCI

Dr. Seyed A. Sajjadi is a UCI Health neurologist who specializes in memory disorders and whose clinical interests include Alzheimer's disease and atypical forms of dementia. He earned his medical degree at Tehran University of Medical Sciences and a PhD in neurosciences at the University of Cambridge, where he also completed his neurology residency and behavioral neurology fellowship at Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust. As a clinician scientist studying neurodegenerative pathologies across the aging spectrum, his research encompasses Alzheimer's disease, primary progressive aphasia, frontotemporal dementia, and dementia in the oldest adults. He is the recipient of multiple NIH grants and the inaugural UCI Institute for Memory Impairments and Neurological Disorders (UCI MIND) Joan and Don Beall Scholar Award.



KATHERINE BANGEN, PHD | UCSD

Katherine J. Bangen, Ph.D., ABPP-CN, is a Staff Neuropsychologist and Training Director of the Neuropsychology Postdoctoral Residency Program at the VA San Diego Healthcare System. Dr. Bangen is a board-certified clinical neuropsychologist whose research focuses on neurocognitive aging and early detection of Alzheimer's disease, with an emphasis on vascular and neurobiological contributors to cognitive decline. Using advanced MRI approaches, she examines cerebral blood flow and white matter changes associated with aging and dementia risk. She has led and collaborated on numerous federally and foundation-funded studies supported by NIH, VA, Department of Defense, the Alzheimer's Association, and the Dana Foundation. Dr. Bangen is an elected Fellow of the International Neuropsychological Society and the American Psychological Association (Division 40).