

The LookOut news

By Jorge Casuso

April 3 -- The John Wayne Cancer Institute at Saint John's Health Center could soon be a leader in prostate cancer research thanks to a \$6.5 million gift announced last week.

The landmark gift from Carolyn Dirks -- a trustee of both the hospital and the institute -- will create a new translational research and clinical program to help fight the leading incidence of cancer among American men.

The Dirks/Dougherty Prostate Center will feature a robotic surgical system and a three-room laboratory that will use cutting edge technology, institute officials said during a ceremony Thursday.



From left: Chief of Science and Medicine for JWCI, Dr. Armando E. Giuliano; Chairman of the board for JWCI, Patrick Wayne; Carolyn Dirks Dougherty, and Brett Dougherty. (Photo credit – Lee Salem Photography, Inc.)

“You are making a cherished dream possible,” said Patrick Wayne, Chairman of the board of the institute named after his father. “We hoped the institute would impact the broadest base of cancer patients.”

Carolyn Dirks “is a model of personal vision,” said Lou Lazatin, president and CEO of both organizations. “This is really a gigantic leap forward. . . You’ve made dreams come true.

“She’s a wonderful, incredible spirit,” Lazatin said. “It is not just something that is trendy. She’s been doing this quietly for ten-plus years.”

A longtime supporter of Saint John’s, Dirks donated money to help rebuild the half-century-old facility after it was battered by 1994 Northridge Earthquake, hospital officials said.

“She was the first to step forward to help rebuild the hospital,” said Carl McKinzie, chairman of the Saint John’s board. “She came forward to build a future of hope.”

Dirks’ gift, McKinzie said, will “touch the lives of thousands of ill patients and their families and advance research” in prostate cancer, which affects one in every six American men.

“I know Carolyn’s father is looking down and smiling on this very special day,” he said.

The robotic surgical system – “an extraordinarily expensive piece of equipment” – will help surgeons reach areas inaccessible by traditional means, said Dr. Armando Giuliano, the institute’s chief of science and medicine.

“The robot enables the surgeon to operate and get in spaces in the pelvis you can’t really get to with your hands,” Giuliano said. The gift, he added, “will allow us to combat this terrible, terrible national problem.”

The cutting-edge surgical system is the newest in the institute’s growing arsenal of weapons to combat cancer.

The John Wayne Cancer Institute’s Department of Molecular Oncology is using technology similar to that showcased in the popular television series CSI to isolate clusters of cells, said Dr. Dave Hoon, the department’s director.

The isolated images -- outlined and cut with digital imaging technology -- can help diagnose and target tumors, Hoon said.

“Before it was very subjective,” he said. “Now, with a minimum amount of specimen, you get a maximum amount of information.”

The institute also features a Tissue and Serum Bank that goes back 30 years and is among the largest in the world, featuring one of the oldest melanoma and breast databases.

The vast room lined with refrigerators holds specimens catalogued in an electronic database that allows researchers to quickly pin-point a specimen, no matter how old.