

Dr. James Economou sees his role as deputy director of UCLA's Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center very simply. He wants to help cancer center leadership to support and fine tune the UCLA oncology academic engine.

"The way academic medical centers are currently organized is illogical and counterintuitive," said Economou, who also serves as chief of the division of surgical oncology and director of the Human Gene Medicine Program at UCLA. "Medical schools and university hospitals are organized along the lines of departments instead of academic programs. This structure has been the same for more than 100 years. But the way we organize our daily professional lives is along the lines of academic engines or disciplines—oncology, cardiovascular medicine, neuroscience—and all of the interested players—clinicians, translational investigators, the basic scientists—organize themselves to form interdisciplinary teams that make up the academic engine. Our cancer center exemplifies one such academic engine that helps to integrate everyone on this campus interested in cancer."

Since he was appointed deputy director last fall, Economou has worked tirelessly to bring together specialists from different UCLA departments, such as surgery, genetics and medical oncology, and provide the foundation and support they need to unite and focus on a common goal, finding better and more effective ways to prevent, detect and treat cancer.

With his broad experience in patient care and research, Economou was the best choice to serve as the cancer center's deputy director, said Judith C. Gasson, Jonsson Cancer Center director.

"He's a gifted surgeon and a nationally recognized expert in gene-based vaccine therapies for melanoma and liver cancer," she said. "He is on the vanguard of cancer research."

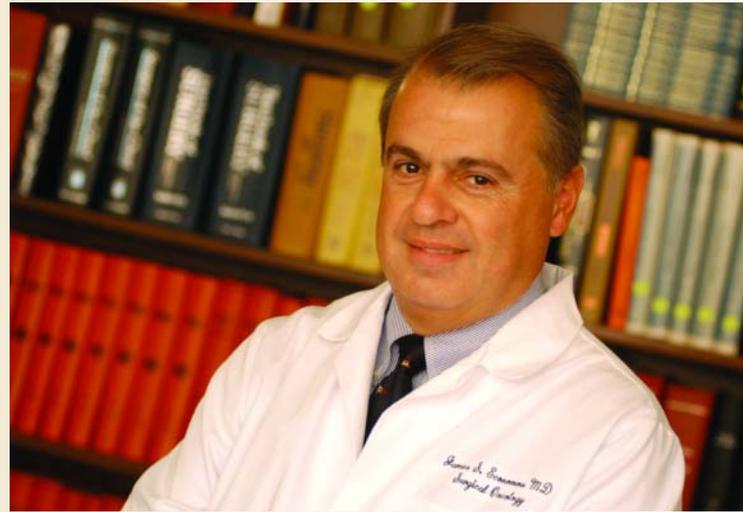
Economou ensures collaborations between departments, oversees two Specialized Programs of Research Excellence (SPORE) in prostate and lung cancers, supervises seed grants and helps coordinate National Institutes of Health training programs within the cancer center. He also works with the cancer center senior leadership to identify program goals and provide funding and space support, as well as academic oversight.

"Without a comprehensive cancer center structure that can dispense space and resources, the oncology effort at this institution would be disorganized and fragmented," he said. "Judy Gasson and the other cancer center directors have provided outstanding leadership and vision to this program. I hope to contribute to this effort from my perspective as a surgical oncologist and a translational investigator in cancer gene therapy."

Economou performs about 400 surgeries a year, specializing in melanoma, primary and metastatic liver cancer and sarcomas. Along with Dr. John Glaspy and Dr. Antoni Ribas, he leads a laboratory that is developing gene therapy treatments for melanoma and liver cancer.

"Our goal is to understand the underlying regulation of anti-tumor immunity," Economou said. "I rely a great deal on collaborations within our scientific community to move the science along."

Economou divides his time between patient care,



Dr. James Economou

PROFILE

Finding common ground between researchers and clinicians.

research and administration. He spends about two days a week in the operating room, and sees patients two half days a week. In addition to his administrative duties in the cancer center, surgical oncology and the Human Gene Medicine Program, Economou also sits on two National Cancer Institute study sections, boards composed of senior investigators who review grant applications. He flies to Bethesda, Md., six times a year to fulfill that obligation.

His NCI responsibilities give him valuable insight into the peer review process, information he passes along to young cancer center scientists who must rely on grant funding to support their research.

Economou said this is an exciting time to be in cancer research.

"The sequencing of the human genome has ushered in a new era," he said. "It will allow us to better understand the genetic profile of individual cancers and allow us to design novel targeted therapies. These therapies may target the intracellular pathways essential for tumor growth and progression. Genome-wide approaches will allow us to promote robust discovery-based cancer research."

Economou said he has enjoyed his time as deputy director of the cancer center and looks forward to helping keep its academic engine running smoothly.

"The best thing about this job is that I get to work with leaders who have a great record in building outstanding academic programs," he said. "This is a wonderful learning experience."

A graduate of Johns Hopkins, where he earned his bachelor's, doctorate and medical degrees, and the University of California, San Francisco, general surgical training program, Economou joined the faculty of UCLA in 1986. He currently is the Beaumont Professor of Surgery and also is a professor of microbiology, immunology and molecular genetics.

He and his wife, Denice, a master's level clinical nurse educator, live in Pacific Palisades with their three sons aged 11 to 17, who are active in scouting, soccer, skiing and water sports. ★