

The blood detective

December 8 2009, by Tom Vasich

(PhysOrg.com) --UCI hematologist Dr. Jae Chang employs medical sleuthing skills to identify rare blood disorders.

When Brent Wong graduated in June with UC Irvine's first nursing science class, he didn't have to go far to land a job. Wong works as a nurse in the [neonatal intensive care](#) unit at UC Irvine Douglas Hospital, and he's already making a big difference in the lives of its tiniest patients.

Wong is one of more than 150 physicians, nurses and therapists who care for critically ill and premature newborns in the state-of-the-art unit, part of UCI's highly regarded, multidisciplinary maternal-fetal program.

Some of the babies, born months too soon, are barely larger than an adult hand and spend weeks in NICU incubators before being healthy enough to go home with joyful parents.

The work is demanding. UC Irvine Douglas Hospital is home to one of Orange County's highest-level NICUs, which accepts infants with the most challenging health complications. The unit can hold 38 newborns at once, all of whom require constant attention. Because they're so fragile, their conditions can worsen rapidly.

"Seeing these babies in such a vulnerable state makes you want to give the best care possible. They can't tell you they're not feeling well, so you have to pay attention and be prepared for anything," Wong says. "The way we treat them now will affect the rest of their lives, and I feel good

playing a part in that."

Wong and 20 of his fellow UCI nursing graduates took positions with UC Irvine Healthcare, which encompasses UC Irvine Medical Center, affiliated clinics and physicians' practices. Four joined him in the NICU.

Their matriculation is a result of the bridges built between UC Irvine Healthcare and the young nursing science program, says founding director and professor Ellen Olshansky.

Started in 2005, the program is Orange County's first to offer a traditional four-year bachelor's in nursing, and students must spend 120 hours learning in a clinical setting. For the program to succeed, Olshansky says, "we needed to build a strong synergy with UC Irvine Healthcare, and we've been able to do it."

Working at UC Irvine Medical Center and its clinics lets the graduates maintain the close ties they formed as nursing science pioneers. Each transferred to that program from others - Wong came to UCI to study applied ecology - but they became nurses together.

"It's like a class reunion," Wong says. "I know people in every department, and it's good to see them doing well. Working here is everything I want it to be."

Provided by UC Irvine

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