

Holy Cross Physicians Association – Hall of Honor – October 4, 2025

John A. Zaia, MD '64



John A. Zaia, MD, class of '64. As a physician-scientist, he made transformative contributions to the fields of virology, pediatrics, and gene therapy.

Just by the numbers, his 200 peer-reviewed publications, 32 book chapters and invited articles, 185 scientific abstracts for national meetings, 11 US patents, 12,964 citations (and still growing) should put him in our Hall of Honor.

But I would like to focus on another aspect of his life's work that's a little more difficult to gauge: He spent over 40 years in the same place. He helped develop City of Hope in LA. into the National Cancer Center it is today – an NCI-designated Comprehensive Cancer Center with 1000 scientists, 500 physicians, and 10,000 employees. He retained his position as Director, Infectious Disease Section, Department of Pediatrics, for 40 years. But his faculty progression at the Medical Center involved professorships and chairmanships in newly developing fields, including an endowed chair in Gene Therapy and Directorship of the Center for Gene Therapy.

One position he was most proud of and that he held for 10 years till his death was Director of the City of Hope Alpha Stem Cell Clinic. This was a program that took laboratory findings through to clinical trials on patients with the help of state funds. We can see what effect he had on the people and programs around him at City of Hope by the fact that John was chosen to represent the Institution and personally conduct the tour for Queen Elizabeth II when she visited the facility.

But the achievement I would most like to focus on by John was his maintenance of a presence in the eye of the storm for over 20 years as people began to figure out what gene therapy was about and what the moral consequences could be. As the Institutional Official or Chair of the IRB and Quality Management Council at the Hospital, as chairman for the NIH Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee, as a member of the FDA Cellular, Tissue and Gene Therapies Advisory

Committee and on the editorial board of Genes, John was referred to multiple times by his colleagues at his memorial service as “the voice of calm and reason in a room full of chaos.”

From his letter to the editor of NEJM on the occasion of the first death of a patient in a gene therapy trial to his contributions to all the clinical trial decisions under his watch, we can see John’s contribution to the formation of this new gene therapy field. When he was a guest panelist at a high-profile meeting on this subject, he said that his time at Holy Cross with a philosophy and theology minor helped form his thinking. John was a moral force in his field of gene therapy, a voice for integrity, a role model, and a leader in conducting ethical, innovative, and safe human subject research. John was a true son of Holy Cross.

This is why the awards committee, by unanimous ballot at the earliest opportunity his name could come up, voted John Zaia into its Hall of Fame.

Respectfully Submitted by David Zamierowski ‘64