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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
November 15, 2006**

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LLU professor to appear on CNN special this Sunday

A Loma Linda University professor and researcher will be featured in a special program to air on CNN this Sunday, November 19, at 7:00 p.m. Pacific Standard Time. The one-hour program will be called “Happiness and Your Health: The Surprising Connection.” It will re-air three hours later, at 10:00 p.m. P.S.T., and again on Thanksgiving Day, November 23, at 1:00 p.m. P.S.T. Visit <www.cnn.com/happiness> for more information on the program.

The special features Lee S. Berk, DrPH, an expert on the benefits of laughter. He is an associate professor of health promotion and education in the School of Public Health and an associate research professor of pathology and human anatomy in the School of Medicine at LLU.

CNN chose Dr. Berk, a preventive care specialist, for the broadcast because he is a leader in his field, according to David Martin, senior producer for CNN’s medical unit.

“We’re trying to find the science behind laughter, and he’s the man to talk to,” says Mr. Martin.

A CNN crew flew to California in early September and interviewed Dr. Berk. The crew included Mr. Martin and Dr. Sanjay Gupta, senior medical correspondent for the health and medical unit at CNN. Dr. Gupta interviewed Dr. Berk, and the two men discussed many aspects of laughter research—including how laughing improves health, the mind-body connection, and the nature of happiness. Dr. Gupta also wanted to know what kind of impact Dr. Berk’s work has had on his own life.

“My whole life changed,” Dr. Berk told Dr. Gupta. “I recognized the inherent physiological value of being happy.”

Dr. Berk says he enjoyed being interviewed by Dr. Gupta and is curious to see which portions of the interview will be aired. However, he has done many interviews since he began researching laughter. His first television interview was

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with the CBS program “60 Minutes” in the 1980s. Since then, Dr. Berk has been interviewed multiple times by television stations, including the Discovery Channel, the BBC, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Korean Broadcasting System, and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

“This interest has nothing to do with me,” Dr. Berk says. “It has to do with the perceptive needs of the public and the media in how to counter the wildness of our society and the stresses that we live under in modern times. Proverbial biblical wisdom tells us to ‘be of good cheer.’ We should—with volition, with intent—search out happiness,” he says.

Dr. Berk and colleagues have been conducting studies on humor and laughter since 1985. These colleagues include James Westengard, MT(ASCP), a research specialist in the department of pathology and human anatomy, LLU School of Medicine, and Stanley A. Tan, MD, PhD, of Oakcrest Health Research Institute, located in Yucaipa.

The body of their work shows that “mirthful” laughter—laughter arising from happiness instead of emotions such as embarrassment and anxiety—optimizes the activities of specific components of the neuroendocrine and immune systems and appears to offset physiological and mood states associated with the symptoms of chronic stress. Chronic stress can suppress immunity, especially antiviral and antitumor mechanisms such as natural killer cell activity.

Specifically, LLU researchers previously demonstrated that during a humorous laughter event, there is an increase in the secretion of growth hormone and decreased secretion of epinephrine (adrenaline) and cortisol. Cortisol and epinephrine, when secreted chronically due to stress, can be detrimental, while growth hormone appears to optimize specific aspects of immunity.

When Dr. Berk and others first began their work on laughter, the scientific community was unreceptive, he says. “It was really looked upon as being silly and ridiculous,” he remembers.

Today, that has all changed. Many researchers study laughter and happiness in relation to lifestyle and longevity. Published research studies from other investigators worldwide document the potential for laughter to benefit people with diabetes, cardiovascular disease, allergy, autoimmune disease, negative mood states, and chronic stress. Some research is being done at the gene expression level.

“Laughter is representative of a mindset, and it really goes along with the biblical principle that a merry heart is good medicine,” Dr. Berk says.

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