

# spotlight

## The University of Alabama at Birmingham Comprehensive Cancer Center Bridging the care gap

**T**he University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) Comprehensive Cancer Center is an NCI-designated comprehensive cancer center, and has continuously held this designation for 41 years. UAB's reach is vast, encompassing more than 150,000-square-feet of research space, and is one of the nation's leading cancer research and treatment centers, staffed by more than 330 physicians and researchers. These resources give the cancer center the obligation and the opportunity to provide cutting-edge care to all in the community, said Edward Partridge, MD, Director, UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center.

### State-of-the-Art Care

UAB functions as a matrix cancer center, meaning it is located on the University of Alabama at Birmingham's campus and is an official part of the university's structure. A designated building houses the core structure of the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center. Within this facility, four floors are dedicated to basic research and two floors are devoted to administrative and team support. Clinical research programs are carried out in a number of other facilities on campus. The majority of outpatient clinical activity for the entire university occurs in the Kirklin Clinic. In addition to some of the cancer departments, the facility also includes cardiology, diabetes, medicine, and EMT.

UAB Cancer Center is one of the few institutions to have been awarded three or more Specialized Program of Research Excellence (SPORE) grants from the National Cancer Institute. The cancer center

currently holds SPORes in breast, brain, and pancreatic cancers, and is partnered with Johns Hopkins University on a cervical cancer SPORes.

All GYN oncology services are located in the Women and Infants Center, a new facility opened in 2010.

The 50,000-square-foot Hazelrigg-Salter Radiation Oncology Center, new in 2010, offers the full spectrum of radiation oncology treatment: linear accelerators, 16-slice computed CT, and vaults dedicated to stereotactic radiosurgery in addition to specialty rooms for head and neck patients, observation rooms, and fiber optic and illuminated ceilings for patient comfort.

Adjacent to the building is the Jim Limbaugh Family Park of Hope Honoring Phyllis Limbaugh, a healing garden space for patients and visitors to enjoy.

### Erasing Disparities

UAB is situated in a geographic area of the country where disparities are particularly prominent. Since 1992, the cancer center has worked to reduce cancer health disparities in underserved populations.

One program underway in significantly underserved areas of Alabama and Mississippi is the Deep South Network for Cancer Control.

Two decades ago, the program recruited and trained African-Americans as community health advisers in the central portion of Alabama. This region experienced significant disparities in screening rates and subsequently mortality rates between whites and blacks for



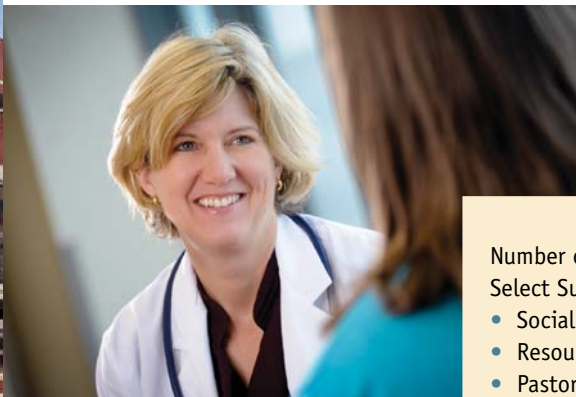
both breast and cervical cancer. Initially, these lay health advisers were trained to promote breast and cervical cancer screenings. The program helped to reduce a 17 percent gap in screening rates in the Medicare population between whites and blacks to 0.25 percent.

### Robust Navigation Services

About five years ago, UAB developed a clinical support program called the Integrated Multidisciplinary Cancer Care Program. All disease sites treated at the center have a dedicated nurse serving as a patient care coordinator. This team member's primary role is to schedule the first visit for all new patients. This coordination ensures that any multi-specialty visits, imaging, pre-op testing, etc., are all scheduled to be completed on the first day. The goal is for the patient to receive a treatment plan by the end of the day. In addition to the nine disease-site patient care coordinators, UAB has five dedicated patient navigators.

The cancer center tries in particular to assist low-income patients with navigation services. New patients are contacted via phone to assess their need for navigation services. If a need is identified, the navigators engage the patient and

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Number of analytic cases: 5,000

Select Support Services:

- Social work
- Resource library
- Pastoral care
- Support groups
- Nutrition consultations
- Patient navigation
- Educational programs

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family with the goal of overcoming the barriers to the prescribed treatment.

In addition, UAB has two clinical trials navigators to help low-resource individuals overcome the barriers to clinical trial participation. This initiative has helped to double minority participation in clinical trials. Currently, the cancer center accrues approximately 11 percent of patients to clinical trials annually.

### **Deep South Cancer Navigation Network**

After a decade and a half of experience using traditional navigators, UAB decided in 2012 to spread its navigation initiative to its affiliate community cancer centers, as well as centers in Mississippi and Tennessee.

“We’re in the early stages of implementation so we don’t know how well it’s going to work and certainly if it is successful, we will be on the cutting-edge of designing a perhaps new and better way to deliver cancer care,” said Partridge.

Through this initiative, UAB will expand its navigation program into all of its Cancer Care Network affiliated institutions and broaden the scope of navigation to include the full continuum of care from diagnosis through survivorship.

The premise behind the program was that use of navigation services during acute care could anticipate and resolve problems that might lead to emergency room visits, hospitalizations, and ICU admissions. By reducing the number of unnecessary admissions in Medicare patients

across the 11 institutions participating in the program, UAB estimates possible savings of \$49.8 million over a period of three years.

During the survivorship phase, navigators would engage the patient and their family in healthy behavior (tobacco control and healthy eating, physical activity, management of co-morbidities, etc.) and then also train providers to have conversations with patients and families about choices that patients have at the end-of-life. Hopefully these conversations would lead to getting patients into hospice one month earlier than traditionally (when appropriate) and avoiding non-curative chemotherapy in the last two weeks of life.

### **UAB Cancer Care Network**

The UAB Cancer Care Network, developed by UAB Medicine and the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center, is a network of hospitals across Alabama, Florida, and Georgia. The goal of this network is to foster affiliations with community hospitals in order to better serve the patients in this region. This program supports community-based oncology services by building collaborative physician relationships, offering local patients the opportunity to enroll in clinical trials, and providing access to UAB’s best practices in cancer care at a local level.

### **Obesity & Cancer**

Another initiative UAB is passionate about is the relationship between obesity and cancer.

According to a study published by the CDC in 2012, Alabama ranks fourth highest in the nation for adult obesity rates behind Mississippi, Louisiana, and West Virginia.

“We feel like again we’re located in the epicenter of this pandemic. Our research programs at all levels, basic, clinical, and cancer control population-based, need to take a lead in understanding how we might be able to ameliorate and understand this epidemic and its relationship to cancer,” said Partridge. He would like UAB to become a national leader in what he calls “energetics in cancer,” the relationship between physical activity and healthy or unhealthy eating and cancer.

### **Courage Companions**

One way UAB commits to treating the whole patient is their Courage Companions program. Cancer patients with a new diagnosis can request to be linked to a “courage companion.” This volunteer is an individual who has experienced cancer and already gone through treatment and is willing to engage that newly diagnosed person either by phone or by email to answer questions, alleviate fears, and assist with the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a cancer diagnosis. Available if needed, this program is free for all patients and completely confidential.

Visit the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center’s website, [www.uab.edu/cancer](http://www.uab.edu/cancer), for more information and check out Dr. Partridge’s blog at <http://uabccc.blogspot.com>. 