

Now in the top 10 list of U.S. clinical trial centers, the state's premier cancer center brings hope to the patients and families of Oklahoma.



Stephenson at Six

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

Pushing the needle forward has been the mission of the University of Oklahoma Peggy and Charles Stephenson Cancer Center since its debut six years ago. In that brief time, the center has become a national leader in cancer research and a regional site for cancer care that draws patients from all of Oklahoma's 77 counties and neighboring states.

"Being a destination cancer center means that you have developed research-based, patient-centered, multidisciplinary care teams," says Robert Mannel, M.D., director of the cancer center since inception. "That's what we set out to do in 2011, and we've accomplished it. When patients come here, they don't come to see a physician, they come to see a team."

Those teams address every major form of cancer through a network of 11 clinics and six specialty and treatment centers, including branch facilities at OU-Tulsa's Schusterman Clinic and Tisdale Specialty Clinic. The Stephenson Cancer Center has treated nearly 13,000 people since the facility opened its doors, and patient visits have tripled in that period.

Mannel says the Stephenson Center's exponential growth is tied directly to the fact that it has been ranked among the top 10 Phase I clinical trial centers nationwide. One in four patients at the Stephenson Center choose to participate in clinical trials, which offer personalized, targeted medication being used for the first time in humans. Often, Phase I medications are a patient's best hope.

"We must recognize that, today, about 35 percent of patients with a cancer diagnosis will ultimately succumb to the disease," Mannel says, explaining that in addition to seeking a cure for themselves, clinical trial patients also take great pride in doing their part to progress cancer research. "The question is, 'Are there opportunities for not only treating the patient, but also advancing and learning?'"

Laboratory research plays its own crucial role, he says, and the Stephenson Center has attracted more than 40 Ph.D.

cancer researchers who have brought \$30 million in national grant funding with them to OU. Such funding supports medical innovations that have grabbed headlines, including the development of a pill that might one day prevent cervical cancer and a vaccine that shows promise in battling brain cancer.

"And there's another arm of the Stephenson Center that reaches out into the community," Mannel adds. "How do we promote a healthier lifestyle? How do we decrease the use of tobacco in the state?" The cancer center takes seriously its obligation to be a resource for all of Oklahoma, through consultations with other cancer providers, partnering with communities in education, and advising policymakers. One example is the success of recent legislation that prohibits minors from using tanning beds, which have been strongly linked to skin cancer.

These achievements have led OU's Stephenson Cancer Center to being considered for National Cancer Institute designation, thought to be the ultimate validation of cancer research and care. Oklahoma is one of only 15 states nationwide without an NCI-designated cancer center. Application was a multi-year process that produced a 1,157-page document relating every aspect of the Stephenson Center's impact. Mannel says it will take a full year for the application to be reviewed, including a site visit from a team of NCI investigators.

"None of us can know the future, but I'm very optimistic about our chances for achieving NCI status," he says. The dream of a nationally recognized cancer center built by Oklahomans for Oklahomans appears to have come true.

"We can honestly say that we offer Oklahomans the level of services that they deserve and access to physicians who are specialty-trained. I'm extremely proud of the progress that has been made."



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