

# OU Health Stephenson Cancer Center

A photograph of a man with white hair and red-rimmed glasses, wearing a dark blue suit jacket, a white shirt, and a red patterned tie. He is smiling and shaking hands with another person whose arm and hand are visible on the right side of the frame. The person shaking hands with him is wearing a white lab coat and a watch. The background shows a large window with a view of a cityscape and a parking lot with several cars. A pair of blue surgical scissors is hanging from a metal stand in the background.

BY APRIL WILKERSON

THE LIFESAVING POWER OF CLINICAL TRIALS COMES  
TO NORTHEASTERN OKLAHOMA

# Expands to Tulsa



William Poole celebrates victory over cancer with Dr. Susanna Ulahannan, who helped save his life through a clinical trial at OU Health Stephenson Cancer Center.

**W****ILLIAM POOLE**

simply doesn't believe in dead-end roads.

In 2018, he faced a return of the bile duct cancer for which he had been successfully treated six years earlier. The path forward seemed bleak. But his desire to live led him to the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences campus in Oklahoma City, where he enrolled in a clinical trial at OU Health Stephenson Cancer Center.

Today, the most sophisticated technology can find no evidence of disease in his organs or circulating in his blood.

"It was a very fearful time in my life," Poole says, "but everything I read about and learned put me on a road to Stephenson Cancer Center. Within five minutes of being there, I knew I was where I needed to be."

Poole responded favorably to an innovative new drug that was being studied in the clinical trial, but he also was strengthened by having to travel only a short distance from his home in Edmond, Okla. Undergoing cancer treatment close to home, near the support of family and friends, was healing in itself, he says.

With the expansion this spring of Stephenson Cancer Center to Tulsa, that experience is becoming a reality for thousands of people in northeastern Oklahoma. Providers will temporarily see patients and conduct clinical trials in Tulsa starting this summer, and planning is underway to build a new, advanced facility on the OU-Tulsa campus.

Stephenson is Oklahoma's only National Cancer Institute-designated center, which is the gold standard for research-driven care. Stephenson first earned its NCI designation in 2018 and successfully renewed it in 2023 after a rigorous review process. The drive to expand research-driven cancer care will further OU's goal to achieve the prestigious "NCI Comprehensive Care Center" status by 2028 and join a circle of only 57 such cancer centers in the United States.

Stephenson provides both a depth of expertise and a breadth of reach not available elsewhere in Oklahoma. The state faces a heavy burden of cancer, but establishing a statewide network brings hope for a healthier future—statistics show that patients who receive their care at NCI-designated centers have up to a 25% improved survival rate one year from diagnosis.

"OU's fundamental purpose is to change lives, and there is no clearer sign



of our impact and potential than the work of the Stephenson Cancer Center," says OU President Joseph Harroz Jr. "We are humbled by the opportunity to transform cancer treatment in northeastern Oklahoma through research-based, academic health care—a milestone that holds the promise of uplifting the health of countless Oklahomans for generations to come."

In Oklahoma, one in three women and one in two men are diagnosed with cancer during their lifetime. Each year, 23,000 new cases are diagnosed, and the state ranks fourth in the nation for the highest rate of deaths. People living in the northeastern part of the state have the lowest rate of participation in clinical trials, yet they comprise one-third of the state's population. The expansion to Tulsa is expected to result in access to research-driven cancer care for thousands of additional patients a year.

NCI-level care is distinctive for several reasons. Each patient is treated by a multidisciplinary team of providers, including medical, radiation and surgical oncologists and pathologists who work together to customize plans of care. A variety of support services are available as well, such as cancer nutrition, physical therapy, occupational therapy, psycho-oncology, genetic counseling and palliative care.

Stephenson Cancer Center is also driven by research. Approximately 160 researchers are working on more than 450 biomedical research projects that earn over \$66 million in annual funding from the National Institutes of Health, American Cancer Society and others.

The cancer center offers nearly 300 clinical trials, including the state's only Phase 1 Clinical Trials Program, which studies investigational drugs being given



The work of Stephenson Cancer Center has potential even beyond ending cancer. A research team led by Hiroshi Yamada, left, is using cancer investigation methods to advance our understanding of Alzheimer's disease.

OU HEALTH

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—PRESIDENT JOSEPH HARROZ JR.

to humans for the first time. Advancing care through research and innovation is a primary mission of NCI-designated centers like Stephenson.

“Clinical trials are so important because they allow us to bring tomorrow’s therapies here today,” says Robert Mannel, M.D., director of Stephenson Cancer Center. “And the only way to access new cutting-edge therapies—especially for patients who have recurrent tumors or cancer that doesn’t respond to traditional treatment—is through these clinical trials. We are committed to making them available in northeastern Oklahoma.”

Susanna Ulahannan, M.D., director of Stephenson’s Oklahoma TSET Phase 1 Clinical Trials Program, says the unit is among the largest in the country for patient enrollment. Currently, it offers more than 70 Phase 1 trials with some 270 patients enrolled.

Elizabeth Wellberg's research is closing the gap in understanding the link between obesity and breast cancer. The OU assistant professor of pathology's work is just one example of the importance of research-driven, academic health care.



SHEVAUN WILLIAMS

"I'm often struck by the willingness of patients to contribute to science," Ulahannan says. "Of course, patients want to benefit from a new drug, but they will often say, 'Even if it doesn't help me, I'm willing to do it if it can help find better treatments and opportunities for people after me.'"

"Healthcare shouldn't be an 'away game,'" adds OU Health President and CEO Richard P. Lofgren, M.D. "This expansion into Tulsa aligns with our commitment to improving the health and well-being of our communities."

Stephenson's expansion to northeastern Oklahoma will also bring new screening options for people in Tulsa and surrounding communities. The cancer center's mobile screening units for breast and lung cancer, as well as resources like home screening for colon cancer and human papilloma virus, will be part of an extensive outreach program.

"Early detection is one of the most critical ways to reduce the mortality of cancer

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because we need to find it early when it's more treatable," says Senior Vice President and Provost of OU Health Sciences Gary Raskob. "This is especially important for people in smaller communities, who

might have to drive two to three hours to get a mammogram or CT screening for lung cancer. Our mission is to create more equitable access for the broader population."



Charles and Peggy Stephenson



OU Health Stephenson Cancer Center Director Dr. Robert Mannel.



Stephenson Cancer Center

The cancer center’s expansion to Tulsa is possible because of a public/private partnership with key stakeholders in Tulsa, the Legislature, OU, University Hospitals Authority and Trust, and OU Health. The Legislature has committed an initial \$50 million, including \$20 million in federal funding through the American Rescue Plan Act. In addition, OU has raised \$35 million toward a philanthropic goal of \$100 million, including an \$8 million gift from the Cherokee Nation.

The northeastern Oklahoma presence is the realization of a dream for the cancer center’s namesakes, Peggy and Charles Stephenson of Tulsa, whose support led to the opening of Stephenson Cancer Center in Oklahoma City and is central to the Tulsa expansion through a recent major gift. When Peggy was diagnosed with breast cancer nearly 30 years ago, she received excellent treatment but had to travel out of state for her care. She wants Oklahomans to have the same access to quality treatment without crossing a state border.

Peggy remembers her fear upon finding a lump in her breast, followed by many months of treatment and the loss of her hair. Since Stephenson Cancer Center opened in Oklahoma City, she has been a frequent visitor, often arriving unannounced. She quietly joins people in waiting rooms and sits in solidarity with those facing the uncertainty of their diagnosis.

“I like to talk to people so they will be more comfortable,” she says. “I tell them that I had breast cancer and we visit, and it is a great privilege to do that. They are often lonesome and anxious because they don’t know what’s going to happen.”

Knowing that the same comprehensive treatment and clinical trials Peggy received are now available in Tulsa is gratifying for the Stephensons. As natives of Antlers, Okla., and Tulsans for more than 50 years, they have a fondness for Oklahoma communities of all sizes and want to help spread the cancer center’s resources as widely as possible.

“We are thankful to be a part of the effort to bring the best treatment and clinical trials to Tulsa,” Charles says. “People are cared for in a very compassionate and professional way at Stephenson Cancer Center, and that is what we want to bring to northeastern Oklahoma.”

For William Poole, the expansion to Tulsa means more Oklahomans will know the same compassion and hope he has encountered.

“I’ve never experienced support and kindness from a group of people like I have at Stephenson Cancer Center, from the doctors to the nurses and the staff,” he says. “What you’re looking for as a patient is hope, and they exude the spirit of hope. I always say that thanks to the power of prayer and Sooner Magic, I’m here today.”

*April Wilkerson is OU’s Senior Marketing and Communications Coordinator for Health Sciences Research.*