

TOP



Dr. Craig Slingluff and members of the Human Immune Therapy Center are harnessing the body's immune system to fight cancer.

INVESTING IN

Philanthropy in Action at UVA Cancer Center

Making Breakthroughs Possible

Helping the Body's Immune System Fight Cancer

Cancer therapy has long included three pillars of treatment: surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy. Early cancer diagnoses can often lead to better outcomes.

But what happens with more advanced cancers? Those pillars provide disappointing results in most solid tumor cancers.

UVA alumnus and acclaimed architect Jay Dalgliesh was diagnosed with one of those advanced cancers. While a patient at UVA, his doctors discovered an unusual melanoma—one that was detected after it had spread. The original site on the skin was never identified.

“It’s likely that there was an original melanoma on the skin that regressed and the immune system took care of it,” says Craig Slingluff, MD, Dalgliesh’s oncologist and

director of UVA’s Human Immune Therapy Center (HITC). “For whatever reason, part of the melanoma was able to persist.”

It wasn’t long ago that many in the medical community doubted that the immune system might be induced to fight cancer. Slingluff has never been deterred by this conventional wisdom. His team has been working for more than 20 years to understand the immune response to melanoma. Their efforts have led to a number of novel approaches for melanoma and other cancers—cancer vaccines

CONTINUED ON BACK COVER

SPOTLIGHT

Craig Slingluff, MD

Director, UVA’s Human Immune Therapy Center
Joseph Helms Farrow Professor of Surgery



DEAR FRIENDS

Welcome to the inaugural Director's Corner, a place where I can share exciting news about the UVA Cancer Center. In this column I'll highlight new hires, expanded services, and innovative work going on in our labs that will benefit patients in our clinics.

I am excited to welcome Mark Kester, PhD, as the co-director of UVA's Institute for Nanoscale and Quantum Scientific and Technological Advanced Research, or nanoSTAR. Nanotechnology will revolutionize cancer treatment, allowing doctors to target cancer cells and reduce toxicity that is harmful for patients.

Mark joins an impressive and dedicated team of healthcare professionals at the Cancer Center. I look forward to sharing many more announcements in the years to come. In the meantime, please enjoy this issue of *Investing in Hope*.

All the best,
Tom Loughran, Jr., MD
Director, UVA Cancer Center

Giving Patients What They Need

UVA's Hematologic Malignancy Program Expands

When Beth Dickey was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, she and her husband were devastated. The Virginia Beach native and mother of two began to research her options and discovered UVA Cancer Center and Michael Williams, MD, ScM, a leading clinician and researcher in hematologic malignancies.

"Dr. Williams immediately put me at ease," Dickey remembers. "He was so knowledgeable and committed to working with me and my family."

Instead of following the traditional plan of chemotherapy and stem cell treatments, Williams wanted Dickey to watch and wait. She has now gone more than six years without needing treatment. In gratitude for the care she receives, Dickey organizes an annual benefit to raise funds for hematologic cancer research at UVA.

"Being able to see Dr. Williams and come to the Emily Couric Clinical Cancer Center for care has been incredible," she says. "In the face of the fear and turmoil that comes with a cancer diagnosis, UVA offered my family more options, and real relief."

Now, patients with blood cancers will have many more options as UVA expands its clinical and translational research programs, offering patients even more comprehensive care, close-to-home.

Among these programs is a new inpatient unit designed to provide state-of-the-art care for patients with acute leukemia.

"Patients with acute leukemia typically are critically ill with life-threatening infections and/or bleeding," explains

Williams, chief of UVA's Hematology/Oncology Division. "They have numerous acute medical problems and are often in the hospital for a month following initial diagnosis."

This specialized unit is expected to open later this year. Like a mini-ICU, it will be staffed with highly trained nurses who can provide not only the intensive standard chemotherapy, but new therapies through clinical trials as well. The acute leukemia unit will also facilitate stem cell or bone marrow transplants for patients who need them.

For patients with lymphoma and chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL), promising new clinical trials are now underway at UVA, trials made possible by work being done in UVA's own labs.

"So far, the results of these new drugs for patients who've not responded to traditional chemotherapy have been dramatic, in most cases with very few side effects," explains Williams. "We're seeing real progress in improving outcomes and survival for patients."

And that's news patients and families who turn to UVA want to hear.

"We have the best doctors and researchers right in our backyard," says Dickey, "people who are experts in their fields. UVA is an incredible resource for our community and all of Virginia."



Beth Dickey with oncologist Dr. Michael Williams.

“*In the face of the fear and turmoil that comes with a cancer diagnosis, UVA offered my family more options, and real relief.*”



Members of the Patients & Friends Steering Committee celebrate another successful *Hot Topics in Cancer* with Dr. Loughran (6th from right) and Dr. Williams (5th from right).

COMMUNITY

Building Hope

UVA Patients & Friends Going Strong

Meredith Gunter, an avid Virginia basketball fan, realizes that many people know the names of the players that took the team to the Sweet 16 this year. As founder and co-chair of Patients & Friends of the UVA Cancer Center, Gunter wishes an equal number knew the names of leading cancer researchers at UVA.

“People in our community often don’t know about the pioneering research happening at UVA,” Gunter says. “We want to tell these stories and give people a chance to directly support this fabulous work.”

Over the past 15 years, Patients & Friends has raised more than \$3 million to support innovative, lifesaving cancer research. The group’s efforts have helped

speed critical work into almost every type of cancer—from helping advance the development of cancer vaccines, to increasing the effectiveness of chemotherapy, or accelerating clinical trials for lung cancer.

In addition to raising funds, Patients & Friends provides educational outreach through special events held each year. One such event, *Hot Topics in Cancer*, recently brought people together to listen to Dr. Thomas Loughran, director of UVA Cancer Center, and Dr. Michael Williams, chief of Hematology/Oncology, discuss new directions for care.

“What we’ve found is an enthusiastic audience who wants to know more and do more,” says Diane Melton, co-chair of

Patients & Friends. “We can’t believe how much it’s grown.”

In fact, what began as a small group has turned into a grassroots effort that now extends to other volunteer organizations. In the last several years, these groups have funneled proceeds from their events through Patients & Friends.

“We are thrilled to partner with so many groups,” Melton says. “From the Hockey Cure Cup to the Charlottesville Women’s Four Miler, people are finding more ways to support UVA Cancer Center.”

“That’s the beauty of Patients & Friends,” Gunter says, “it’s one hundred percent volunteer-driven and helps people support dedicated Virginians whose work will improve lives around the world.”

GOING ALL IN Cavaliers Against Cancer

On March 15, John Paul Jones Arena again played host to the Cavaliers Against Cancer Texas Hold ‘Em Tournament.

In its fourth year, the event raised more than \$20,000 in support of the Rebecca Clary Harris, M.D. Memorial Fellowship. The fund provides fellowships in clinical and translational research to graduate students in the Human Immune Therapy Center at the UVA Cancer Center.

Since 2011 the annual poker tournament has raised more than \$50,000 for the cause, but event co-founders Shawn Brydge and Jason Chestnutt believe there is still more to do. Cavaliers Against Cancer hopes to expand future charity poker events to the UVAClubs of Richmond and Washington, DC.



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that have been administered to hundreds of patients with melanoma with encouraging results.

“In the four years that Jay lived with metastatic melanoma, he lived his life full-tilt, full-time,” remembers Betsy Dalgliesh, Jay’s widow. “He managed to maintain that attitude with his motto of ‘git ’er done.’ That was the way Jay was.”

Innovative Research with Promise

It’s now known that our immune system participates actively in fighting cancer. It’s also clear that treatments to improve immune response to cancer can induce dramatic and durable control of cancer, especially melanoma, but for other cancers as well.

Slingluff recently received nearly \$2 million in NIH funding for a project that combines new cancer drugs with one of his team’s vaccines. He hopes that the combination will help the immune system eradicate cancerous cells more effectively than by using either option alone.

Securing these big NIH grants is often the key to facilitating scientific breakthroughs. However, acquiring funding from the NIH is often a long and tedious process. Many researchers must reapply for funding several



Betsy Dalgliesh

“Donations come in varying amounts and together add up to significant support that allows us to start new projects and explore innovative approaches that have led to exciting new discoveries.”

times, causing, in some cases, delays of years in developing what might become lifesaving treatments.

Thanks to local philanthropy, however, researchers at the HITC have not lost ground.

“We’ve been fortunate to receive donations from patients, families, friends, and others,” Slingluff says. “These donations come in varying amounts and together add up to significant support that allows us to start new projects and explore innovative approaches that have led to exciting new discoveries.”

Exciting New Partnerships

The ongoing work of Slingluff and the HITC has inspired Betsy Dalgliesh to support melanoma research at UVA. In April, she kicked off a five-year effort to establish a research fund in her late husband’s name.

“It is my hope that we can help Dr. Slingluff build a coalition of researchers across the country to find more effective and targeted treatments for melanoma,” she says. “What Dr. Slingluff and his team discover may impact cancer care and give new hope to patients and families facing a cancer diagnosis.”

“Jay didn’t like being a sick person and he didn’t act like one. He kept doing what he was good at,” Betsy Dalgliesh remembers. “I think that is a goal of research—helping people live normal lives for as long as possible.”