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New brain tumor center aims to lead in treatment

University Hospital, UC set sights high

By Peggy O'Farrell • pofarrell@enquirer.com • October 9, 2008

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Doctors took one look at the malignant lump growing just behind John Burkhardt's right eye and told him he had three to six months to live.

That was almost 14 years ago, the College Hill man said.

On Wednesday, officials at University Hospital and the University of Cincinnati announced plans to create a \$26 million Brain Tumor Center that they hope will generate more survivors like Burkhardt.

The center will bring cutting-edge technology and additional researchers and physicians to what organizers hope will become a national leader in brain tumor treatment.

"Our overriding single goal is to eradicate brain tumors," said neurosurgeon Ronald Warnick, director of the new center and chairman of the Mayfield Clinic, a private neurology and neurosurgery practice in Avondale.

Earlier diagnosis and improved treatments have greatly increased survival rates among brain tumor patients in the last decade, Warnick said, but more progress is possible.

In particular, he said, he hopes the center will lead the way in finding a cure for glioblastoma multiforme, the often deadly brain tumor found in Burkhardt and in U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy.

"That's our holy grail," Warnick said.



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John Burkhardt (left), who was successfully treated for a brain tumor, joined his surgeon, Ronald Warnick, at Wednesday's announcement of a new \$26 million treatment center.

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Burkhardt, on hand Wednesday for the announcement at University Hospital, said he didn't know what was wrong with him at first. He woke up every morning with nausea and a headache. He and his doctor blamed sinus trouble.

Eventually, he concluded that a carbon monoxide leak in his own home or in the houses he painted for a living must be causing the problem.

When he turned the heat off in the middle of January to stop the carbon monoxide, his wife, Connie Menefee, ordered him to see a doctor.

His doctor ordered a brain scan. When the results came in, Burkhardt was surprised when doctors wouldn't let him leave the hospital.

"I thought they were having trouble reading it," he said, shaking his head. Brain tumors impair judgment and reasoning.

His own father had died just two years before of the same kind of tumor.

"Our son was 14 at the time, and all I could think was grandfather, father and will our son get this too?" Menefee said.

Burkhardt underwent surgery to remove the tumor, then chemotherapy and radiation to kill off any remaining cancer cells.

A few years ago, he had to have surgery again when tests showed suspicious tissue in his brain. The tissue wasn't cancerous, but doctors were standing by, ready to implant targeted chemo and radiation treatments just in case.

The new center will work with the Barrett Cancer Center at UC, as well as the joint cancer program, a cooperative initiative among UC, University Hospital and Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

To pay for the new center, community donors are expected to give \$8.5 million over the next decade. University Hospital will contribute about \$10 million, while the University of Cincinnati will contribute \$4.5 million. The remainder will come from private physician practices.

This year, 215,000 brain tumors will be diagnosed in the United States. Brain tumor incidence has increased 22 percent overall in the last 20 years, and 55 percent in people over 65, according to the National Cancer Institute. About 80 percent of brain tumors are malignant.

Lee Ann Liska, executive director of University Hospital, called the new center "a tremendous example of strong collaboration between University Hospital and UC."

To accommodate the new center, the hospital will add eight intensive-care beds for brain tumor patients, Liska said. In addition, the hospital will install new Brain Suite technology that lets surgeons view images of the brain in real time during surgeries.

David Stern, dean of UC's College of Medicine, said the new center will let researchers and clinicians bring

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the newest and best treatments to patients battling brain tumors.

"Doing a good job isn't an option," Stern said. "It really has to be outstanding, and the best possible care, the kind of care that we would want ourselves if we were afflicted with this terrible condition."

Ideally, he said, the center will mean patients never have to leave Cincinnati to get treatment.

Research is a key component in the new center, which will bring seven to 10 new clinicians and another seven new researchers to the community over 10 years, Warnick said.

Adult stem therapy, immunotherapy and personalized medicine are among the research priorities, he said.

Locally, researchers are already working on a national trial of a personalized brain tumor "vaccine" that uses a patient's own tumor cells to stimulate the immune system to kill glioblastoma multiforme, he said.

"That's where the real excitement is," Warnick said.

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