New Clinic to Address Long-Term Complications of Childhood Cancer Treatment

Close to 80 percent of children with cancer now survive, but what happens next?

Salt Lake City, February 28, 2011—Although cancer in children is rare, more than 10,000 children in the United States are diagnosed with some form of the disease every year. If these children survive, studies have found that more than two-thirds develop at least one late-effect of treatment, which can include additional cancers, fertility and heart problems, limited limb function, and hearing loss.

To help adult survivors of childhood cancer manage the unique long-term consequences of their treatment, Huntsman Cancer Institute (HCI) at the University of Utah has created the Pediatric Cancer Late Effects Clinic.

“It used to be that when a child finished treatment for cancer they were followed for a year or two, and if they were doing well, their doctor would tell them ‘Congratulations, you’re cured, now go have a good life,’” says Jennifer Wright, M.D., a specialist in pediatric oncology and adult internal medicine who sees patients in the new clinic. “But now we’ve learned there are long-term complications from their treatment that can affect them as adults. They still need close follow up by a specialist who is familiar with the treatment they received as children, as well as the risk factors they now face as adults.”

Wright explains that when patients first come into the clinic, she finds out whatever they can remember about their treatment. “Often when patients were treated at a very young age, they don’t remember specifics, but as long as they know what hospital they were at, I can find out how
they were treated.” She is then able to provide them with a treatment summary and an evaluation of special risk factors that may exist due to the therapy they received.

Difficulties can arise, though. Sometimes patients aren’t able to provide the name of the hospital where they were treated, and sometimes hospitals lose records because of natural disasters, as happened in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. As long as patients are confident of their diagnosis, though, Wright says she can at least look at the time frame and make some assumptions of what their treatment was based on the standard therapy at the time. “It’s a best guess then, but we can still develop screening strategies.”

HCI recommends that any adult who was treated for cancer before turning age 18 should consider visiting the clinic, as well as anyone over age 18 that was treated for a typical childhood cancer like osteosarcoma. Most insurance plans cover the clinic visit, and patients are generally referred back to their primary physician with the treatment summary and screening plan. HCI is the only cancer treatment center in the Intermountain West that has a clinic specifically to care for the needs of adult survivors of childhood cancers.

For information about becoming a patient at the Pediatric Cancer Late Effects Clinic, please call HCI’s Cancer Information Service toll-free at 888-424-2100 or go to www.hci.utah.edu/group/programServices~/wellnessCenter/pediatricCancer.jsp

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The mission of Huntsman Cancer Institute (HCI) at The University of Utah is to understand cancer from its beginnings, to use that knowledge in the creation and improvement of cancer treatments, to relieve the suffering of cancer patients, and to provide education about cancer risk, prevention, and care. HCI is a National Cancer Institute-designated cancer center, which means that it meets the highest national standards for cancer care and research and receives support for its scientific endeavors. HCI is also a member of the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN), a not-for-profit alliance of the world’s leading cancer centers that is dedicated to improving the quality and effectiveness of care provided to patients with cancer. For more information about HCI, please visit www.huntsmancancer.org.