
EXECUTIVE HEALTH & FITNESS

CUSTOM CONTENT • December 5, 2022





Stem cell therapy aims to stop MS in its tracks

Photograph by Michael Der

Jessica Reinhardt feels “reborn” after a stem cell transplant to halt progression of multiple sclerosis.

“It’s like night and day,” says Reinhardt, 40, who is now able to take walks on the beach in Corona del Mar again, sail and travel. “My family says I’m a new person.”

UCI Medical Center is one of a handful of U.S. hospitals to offer the experimental therapy normally reserved for blood cancers to treat MS outside of clinical trials.

So far, three MS patients have undergone the procedure — called autologous hematopoietic stem cell transplantation (aHSCT) — with promising results, says Dr. Stefan O. Ciurea, director of Orange County’s only adult the bone marrow transplant program, which is part of the UCI Health Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center.

MS, which affects an estimated 1 million Americans, attacks nerves in the brain and central nervous system. Symptoms can include pain, numbness, tingling, fatigue, mood and memory issues, and even paralysis. There is no cure.

“It is one of the leading causes of disability among young people,” says UCI Health MS specialist Dr. Michael Y. Sy, who is Reinhardt’s neurologist.

It also can be very difficult to diagnose. As a teenager in New York, a bad case of mononucleosis and sinusitis landed her in a hospital. An MRI scan showed a grape-sized spot in her brain. Doctors ruled out a brain tumor but weren’t sure what it was.

“We now think that was the first sign of multiple sclerosis,” she says.

Through the years, she was plagued by headaches and other health problems. In her mid-30s, crippling leg pains interrupted

her travels in Europe. In 2018, she quit her gym because she was too tired to go.

In 2019, when she couldn’t see after LASIK surgery and her head throbbed in pain, an MRI revealed the same spot on her frontal lobe. But now there were others — on her optic nerve, on a part of the brain that allows the left and right lobes to communicate, and on her spine.

The spots, it turned out, were lesions where MS had destroyed insulating myelin layers along her nerve cells.

Reinhardt faced a grim future. Even with costly medications intended to slow the disease’s progression — which have varying rates of success — each day was a challenge.

Then she read about aHSCT, a therapy being offered for MS in Europe and elsewhere. She and her husband were making plans to travel abroad for the treatment when Sy told her that UCI Health had started a hematopoietic stem cell program. Reinhardt was over the moon.

“ I could have the transplant in my backyard! ”

UCI has a long history of pioneering MS research and treatments, Sy says. This partnership with the stem cell transplant program is yet another noteworthy advance.

Although aHSCT is generally only available to U.S. patients through MS clinical trials, Ciurea says recent studies have shown its effectiveness for MS.

The treatment began with daily injections to stimulate her bone marrow to produce more stem cells. Next came a four-hour process to collect her blood, filter out fresh stem cells and return the rest to her body. Powerful chemotherapy drugs then wiped out her overactive immune system.

Finally on April 7, 2022, she was infused with her healthy stem cells and spent the next three weeks in isolation while her body began to build a new immune system.

“I tell patients it’s like wiping out your hard drive and reinstalling Windows,” Sy says.

It takes about three months see an improvement, Ciurea told her.

“Literally on day 90, all of a sudden, I’m getting out of bed in the morning and I’m out gardening!”

Reinhardt now regards April 7 as her new birthday. “It’s truly a gift and I want to spend my life helping other people with MS get this therapy.”

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UCI Health



Providence partners with TGR Foundation, a Tiger Woods charity:

Addressing health disparities and guiding students toward health care careers



Kenya Beckmann, Providence South Chief Philanthropy Officer; Gordon McNeill, TGR Foundation President and CEO; and Providence physicians John Cross, M.D., and Derek Williams, M.D.

Providence Southern California and TGR Foundation, a Tiger Woods Charity, have formed a partnership that will serve youth and their families across Southern California by closing the gap on health inequities and igniting interest in health careers.

At the heart of the partnership is addressing health equity and inspiring a diverse workforce by providing meaningful career paths, access to health education and health care navigation. The program, known as Empowered Health, will operate out of the TGR Learning Lab, first established in 2006 in Anaheim.

"Providence lives its vision of health for a better world by partnering with like-hearted organizations to build upon each other's strengths and create innovative and effective solutions," said Kevin Manemann, chief executive, Providence South Division. "Based on the TGR Foundation model, Empowered Health is positioned to increase access to health care for families and also to help children explore career paths in the health field."

The two organizations realized a dynamic synergy when they began working together in the early days of the pandemic to distribute COVID-19 care packages during peak surges. Providence mental health therapists have engaged with families and students served by TGR Foundation through a series of workshops in Spanish.

Empowered Health is an evolution of that solution-based team focus. It will invest in youth, families and the community by providing health education and easily accessible health programs that provide multi-generational care in a trusted environment that addresses routine as well as delicate adolescent and adult wellness topics.

This partnership is in line with the Providence mission of outreach to its communities. Employee surveys show this outreach resonates with caregivers at three Orange County Providence hospitals – Providence Mission Hospitals in Mission Viejo and Laguna Beach, Providence St. Joseph Hospital, Orange, and Providence St. Jude Medical Center in Fullerton – as well as Heritage physician groups and other services.

Empowered Health will complement existing TGR Foundation programs by focusing on health equity interventions, health education and workforce development. Equally important, Empowered Health will provide services in a welcoming environment for the whole family.



Health Equity

- Pop-up health clinics will provide free health screenings at the TGR Learning Lab.
- Empowered Health will provide multigenerational care that is focused on health equity interventions such as vaccines and blood pressure.
- When a higher level of care is needed, Providence will connect patients to providers.
- Providence will form community advisory panels to help guide care teams in designing culturally appropriate patient journeys, ensuring all patients experience exceptional care in a welcoming environment.

Health Education

- Empowered Health will provide webinars featuring health topics for children, adolescents and adults. The multilingual programs will focus on culturally sensitive adolescent and adult wellness topics.
- Health education events (online and in person) and health fairs will be hosted at the TGR Learning Lab.

Workforce Development

- Empowered Health will work to connect students' passions to the variety of opportunities in health care careers through a dedicated pathway program.
- Through TGR Foundation's Pathway Program, Providence will provide meaningful group and 1:1 experiences in addition to student mentoring from health care professionals.
- Mentorships and internships will provide opportunities for real-time and real-life experiences not available in a classroom setting while providing volunteer opportunities for Providence providers and caregivers.
- Community Health Worker programs will train students to work in public health, health care and social services. Since many Community Health Workers return to their neighborhoods, they can effectively build connections between at-risk communities and health care providers.

In recent years, Providence responded to the spotlight on inequities in communities of color by expanding its investment through a robust health equity program to provide resources including COVID vaccinations, health monitoring and links to primary care.

Last year, Providence provided \$299 million in grants and programs to help combat social determinants of mental and physical health including poverty, food insecurity, homelessness and chronic mental and physical conditions.

Providence and TGR Foundation are committed to creating health for a better world by reducing health disparities and resource inequities while improving the social factors that affect health. Through the partnership, both organizations are committed to investing in youth and empowering them to thrive.

"We look forward to partnering with Providence, an organization that shares our goal of empowering students to pursue their passions and achieve their dreams," said Woods, who founded TGR Foundation.

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