Changing the Game

MSK’s Adolescent and Young Adult program is ensuring young patients get the best care.
Two of the biggest cancer research conferences of 2020 — put on by the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) and the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) — featured several Memorial Sloan Kettering experts presenting new research. These findings included an assessment of Medicaid expansion on cancer mortality rates and research connecting early-onset cancer with inherited gene mutations in young adults. In response to restrictions put on large gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic, both conferences moved to an entirely virtual format for the first time. Nearly 43,000 people from 138 countries attended the three-day ASCO conference in May, and a total of 73,000 attendees, representing 127 countries, joined the two-part AACR annual meeting held in April and June.

Medicaid and Cancer Mortality Rates

At ASCO, MSK proton therapy fellow Anna Lee and radiation oncologist Fumiko Chino presented findings from their study on the effects of Medicaid expansion on cancer mortality rates after the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010. They found that the 27 states (and the District of Columbia) that expanded Medicaid saw fewer cancer deaths in states with expanded Medicaid. “We estimate that an additional 589 cancer deaths could have been prevented in nonexpanded states had they expanded Medicaid.”

New Research on Gene Mutations

At the AACR meeting, MSK medical oncologist Zsofia Stadler presented research showing that young people with cancer are more likely to have cancers caused by inherited mutations than older people with cancer.

Dr. Stadler says that cancers typically seen in older adults — breast, colon, pancreatic, kidney, prostate, and ovarian — are extremely rare in people age 18 to 39 and are classified as early onset. In her study, 21 percent of people in that early-onset group had an inherited genetic mutation. This means that they were born with the mutation and that it appears in every cell of the body. It also means the mutation was passed down from a parent, and other family members are likely to have it as well.

“In the United States, there are 1.8 million new cancer diagnoses every year. Cancer is a healthcare-amenable condition, meaning that access to health-care is expected to improve survival outcomes," says Dr. Lee. “We wanted to study if there was an additional cancer mortality benefit for residents of states that expanded Medicaid under the ACA, compared to those that did not.”

Senior study author Dr. Chino says that in 2017 alone there were an estimated 785 fewer cancer deaths in states with expanded Medicaid. “We estimate that an additional 589 cancer deaths could have been prevented in nonexpanded states had they expanded Medicaid.”

ROBBINS FAMILY AWARDS RECOGNIZE NURSING EXCELLENCE

In May, seven nursing staff members were honored with a Robbins Family Award for Nursing Excellence. It was the first year that the awards were sponsored by the Robbins Family Foundation, established by longtime MSK Board member Clifton S. Robbins and his family. The award winners were nominated by fellow nurses, administrators, doctors, and patients. “Nurses at MSK have much to be proud of and grateful for,” says Elizabeth McCormick, Chief Nursing Officer. She credits “unwavering support from hospital leadership, which consistently empowers us to deliver high-quality nursing services and to achieve our professional aspirations.”

“In the United States, there are 1.8 million new cancer diagnoses every year. Cancer is a healthcare-amenable condition, meaning that access to healthcare is expected to improve survival outcomes.” — Anna Lee

REMMINDER: GET YOUR FLU SHOT

Getting vaccinated is the most effective way to prevent getting the flu and passing it on to others. So don’t forget to get your flu shot this year!

SCIENCE NEVER STOPS: MSK Researchers Featured at ASCO and AACR Meetings

In another group of young adults with cancers more typical of their age group, just 13 percent had an inherited genetic mutation. These cancers include sarcoma, testicular cancer, and brain cancer.

These results have important implications for the treatment of young people with early-onset cancers, their long-term follow-up care, and genetic testing and counseling of family members, says Dr. Stadler.

Turn to page 19 to read about the awards and honors given to MSK researchers during the AACR meeting.

Excellence in Patient Care Support

Joseph Kesselbrenner
Senior Systems Analyst, Nursing Quality Management

Excellence in Advanced Nursing Practice

Leon Chen
Nurse Practitioner, Critical Care, Intensive Care Unit

Excellence in Nursing Education

Jennifer Fox
Clinical Nurse IV, Outpatient Nursing Services, David H. Koch Center for Cancer Care at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

Excellence in Nursing Research

Kristen Fessole
Senior Nurse Scientist, Nursing Research, Office of Nursing Research

Excellence in Nursing Leadership

Andrea Smith
Nurse Leader, Outpatient Nursing Services, Evelyn H. Lauder Breast Center

Excellence in Nursing Practice

Jessica Agostini
Clinical Nurse IV, Perioperative Nursing Services, Josie Robertson Surgery Center

Excellence in Nursing Research

Meghan Salcedo
Clinical Trials Nurse IV, Outpatient Nursing Services, Myeloma Service

Excellence in Clinical Trials Nursing

Leon Chen
Clinical Nurse IV, Outpatient Nursing Services, David H. Koch Center for Cancer Care at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

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Kristen Fessole
Senior Nurse Scientist, Nursing Research, Office of Nursing Research
Threat from the virus persists. Lies ahead in the new normal as the important lessons about resilience and prior experience. But there was no fashion, meaning that we rely on data to practicing in an evidence-based fashion, the Laboratory Emergency Task Force.

The Path Ahead

MSK didn’t pause during the response to COVID-19. Instead, doctors, nurses, and researchers got creative.

“It felt like watching a terrifying storm moving toward us in slow motion.” That is how Memorial Sloan Kettering lymphoma doctor Matthew Matasar describes watching the COVID-19 pandemic unfold.

MSK doctors, researchers, and staff never wavered in their commitment to continue to provide care for people with cancer, even as much of the world stood paralyzed.

The story of that response has important lessons about resilience and creativity, as well as insights into what lies ahead in the new normal as the threat from the virus persists.

Getting Testing Right

Infectious disease expert Monika Shah discusses the challenges and opportunities MSK faced providing care to patients during the pandemic.

Care Closer to Home

MSK’s regional care locations have been crucial for patient care during the pandemic.

The Research Lens

As doctors and nurses adapted for patient care, MSK’s researchers responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with their own creativity and determination.

The Future of Clinical Trials

Clinical trials are a vitally important part of cancer research, as they investigate possible new therapies.

“A lot of other cancer centers had to pause research during their initial COVID-19 response,” says medical oncologist Matthew Matasar. At MSK, many clinical trials were able to continue.

Ms. Menocal says. Her efforts meant colleagues could avoid exposure to COVID-19. Ms. Menocal knew all too well how dangerous the virus could be: “My cousin, a doctor in Mexico, died of COVID-19. Of course, it was a very difficult time for me both personally and professionally.”

Because of the dedication of researchers like Ms. Menocal, MSK’s labs have resumed their work. “It was very smooth picking up my work again,” she says. “I’m very excited about what’s ahead in cancer research because we are making so many important discoveries.”

“A lot of other cancer centers had to pause research during their initial COVID-19 response,” says medical oncologist Matthew Matasar. At MSK, many clinical trials were able to continue.

“A lot of other cancer centers had to pause research during their initial COVID-19 response,” says medical oncologist Matthew Matasar. At MSK, many clinical trials were able to continue.
Tyler Wong's girlfriend first sensed something was off.

In April 2020, the couple was cuddling at home when girlfriend Joanhy felt a lump in Tyler's belly. Tyler felt it too. Thinking it could be a hernia, Joanhy asked the urologist she works for to examine Tyler. The doctor determined it wasn't a hernia and ordered more tests. Fearing it was something serious, Joanhy called Memorial Sloan Kettering. Tests revealed he had sarcoma that often strikes boys and men—small round tumor, a rare form of cancer. ‘I had just finished school and started an apprenticeship with the carpenters between the ages of 10 and 30,’ says. “He was eager to get the best care and to get started.”

“You have all kinds of resources, but when you have a cancer diagnosis, you wonder if you’re making the right decision,” says. “She spearheaded everything,” he says. Tyler was diagnosed with desmoplastic small round tumor, a rare form of sarcoma that often strikes boys and men between the ages of 10 and 30. “It had just finished school and started an apprenticeship as an electrician with Local Union 3,” the electrician with Local Union 3, “I had just finished school and started an apprenticeship between the ages of 10 and 30.”

When the pain got more intense, the couple was at Danielle’s first meeting with the MSK adult oncologist, Dr. Tap. ‘When I came to MSK, my priorities were to close the gap between pediatric and adult patients and to improve the experience for people in this age range,’ says Dr. Glade Bender. She is internationally known for the development of new treatments for adolescent and young adult cancer. The program unites experts across specialties, including medicine, surgery, social work, sexual health, and survivorship. The goal is simple: provide the best care for MSK patients ages 15 to 39.

The Right Care at the Right Time

When she was 22, Danielle Leventhal noticed a pain in her left shoulder and chest that made it hard for her to breathe. An avid runner, Danielle was also having trouble keeping up with her father when they’d go jogging. “My life had just started, and the diagnosis put everything on hold.”

The uncertainties that came with a life turned upside down were very unsettling. But at MSK, Tyler found answers — and hope. He met Emily Sarro, a nurse practitioner in MSK’s Adolescent and Young Adult (AYA@MSK) program who would help coordinate his care. In addition to explaining his treatment, which would include chemotherapy, immunotherapy, surgery, and likely radiation, Ms. Sarro told him about the wide variety of resources that help patients like Danielle.

“When I came to MSK, my priorities were to close the gap between pediatric and adult patients and to improve the experience for people in this age range,” says Dr. Glade Bender. She is internationally known for the development of new treatments for pediatric solid tumors. “The program unites experts across specialties, including medicine, surgery, social work, sexual health, and survivorship. The goal is simple: provide the best care for MSK patients ages 15 to 39. The Right Care at the Right Time. When she was 22, Danielle Leventhal noticed a pain in her left shoulder and chest that made it hard for her to breathe. An avid runner, Danielle was also having trouble keeping up with her father when they’d go jogging.

“When I came to MSK, my priorities were to close the gap between pediatric and adult patients and to improve the experience for people in this age range.”

— Julia Glade Bender

Danielle Leventhal received a bachelor of fine arts in painting with a second major in art history from the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis. Adolescents and young adults with cancer often receive delayed diagnoses and present with more advanced disease, according to Dr. Glade Bender. Because cancer is very rare in this age group, patients may not think much of their symptoms, and local doctors may not suspect cancer because they see so few cases across their careers — or even none at all. And without expertise in this area, there’s also a gap in meeting their supportive needs, which could lead to worse outcomes for this vulnerable population, says Dr. Tap. At Danielle’s first meeting with AYA@MSK, Ms. Sarro asked Danielle’s mom to step out of the room so she could speak with Danielle one-on-one. Danielle was grateful to have some private time with Ms. Sarro because she felt she had the opportunity to ask more of the hard-hitting questions with someone she related to. She wanted to learn as much as she could about her own long-term health and often didn’t have time to ask questions at her clinic visits, which were more focused on her disease and its current treatment.

“Danielle’s involvement in AYA@MSK has empowered her to be her own advocate and take charge of her treatment,” says Dr. Tap. “It’s just like when your child graduates or gets married. Helping these people find their way is hugely gratifying.”

After surgery, proton therapy, and chemotherapy, Danielle’s cancer went into remission. Unfortunately, it has returned twice. But at MSK, Danielle had more options and is now on a new treatment path.

The Right Care at the Right Time

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AYA@MSK is uniquely positioned to help patients like Danielle.

Setting Out to Save Lives

Broadly, the survival rate for children with cancer has increased greatly in the past three decades. But for adolescents and young adults, there hasn’t been as much progress.

Paul Meyers, Chief of the Sarcoma Service in Pediatrics and Vice Chair for Academic Affairs, notes that there are key biological differences between these groups of patients and across cancers that are not yet understood.

“The most common form of leukemia in children is acute lymphocytic leukemia, which currently has a 90 percent cure rate,” says Dr. Meyers. “The adolescent and young adult population more commonly has acute myeloid leukemia, which is a harder disease to treat and has seen less progress.” For sarcomas, according to Dr. Meyers, older age can often mean a worse prognosis.

But one thing holds true: MSK experts are committed to driving change and improving the outlook for adolescents and young adults.

William Tap, Chief of MSK’s Sarcoma Medical Oncology Service, and Julia Glade Bender, Vice Chair for Clinical Research in the Department of Pediatrics, are leading the mission forward.

“When I came to MSK, my priorities were to close the gap between pediatric and adult patients and to improve the experience for people in this age range,” says Dr. Glade Bender. She is internationally known for the development of new treatments for pediatric solid tumors.

Bridging the Gap

Recognizing the unique needs of adolescents and young adults treated at MSK

Dr. Tap has spent ten years at MSK, making important discoveries to propel new treatments for adolescents and young adults with sarcoma. He says, “When I came to MSK, my priorities were to close the gap between pediatric and adult patients and to improve the experience for people in this age range.”

— Julia Glade Bender

AYA@MSK is uniquely positioned to help patients like Danielle.
Beyond Traditional Care
Cancer is tough, no matter the age. But adolescents and young adults face a whole host of unique challenges.

"Adolescent and young adult patients are much less likely to have alternative sources of financial support if they cannot work, and cancer treatment usually makes it impossible to continue working," says Dr. Meyers. "They also are used to being on their own and typically have much less family support, which makes sticking to treatment difficult."

Less family support can also mean that these young patients may experience depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, according to Alexandra Russo, a clinical social worker who is integral to the AYA@MSK care team.

Social workers provide age-appropriate counseling on how to handle life's transitions in the midst of the unthinkable. They can also make referrals to other MSK specialized services, like social work-led support groups or experts in the sexual health and fertility programs. They can also make referrals to other MSK specialized services, like social work-led support groups or experts in the sexual health and fertility programs.

"These patients in particular can feel a little lost, and their caregivers have their own needs as well," says Ms. Russo. "But we offer support and resources to meet so many of their needs."

"But we offer support and resources to meet so many of their needs," says Ms. Russo. "They can also make referrals to other MSK specialized services, like social work-led support groups or experts in the sexual health and fertility programs.

"The Lounge typically hosts group events that bring the community closer together. Activities can range from video game tournaments to comedy shows together. "Activities can range from video game tournaments to comedy shows together. The future is bright for new treatments too. At MSK, there are now clinical trials just for adolescents and young adults with cancer — though these trials are still a rarity. These trials will help standardize care approaches for patients around the world.

"But MSK doctors and researchers aren’t making advances on their own. It requires a united effort to move the needle and improve survival rates for teens and young adults with cancer."

"When I finished my MBA, I was looking for roles that would suit my temperament. I was introverted, and I’m also social, and I like people. Starting with my days in banking, I was always looking for a connection to a mission or to people, but I never really found it. At MSK, I know that every job that my team helps to fill is touching a patient in some capacity. That gives me the connection that I didn’t have in my other roles."

What do you see your role as Chief Diversity Officer?

"As an institution, we need to have policies and processes to ensure that employees know they can air their concerns without fear of retribution. As an institution, we need to have policies and processes to ensure that employees know they can air their concerns without fear of retribution.

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What do you hope MSK can accomplish, concretely, in supporting diversity and inclusion?

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Personal Perspective

Memorial Sloan Kettering is committed to having conversations about discrimination, diversity, and inclusion, and creating change throughout the organization. Some of our colleagues shared their personal experiences and insights.

LOUIS VOIGT
Associate Attending
Department of Anesthesiology & Critical Care Medicine, Department of Medicine
Chair, Ethics Committee

“I was raised and went to medical school in Haiti and continued my training here in the United States. Through many years at MSK, I’ve been struck by colleagues’ reaction to me — on the units, in the cafeteria, and many other places. I came to realize it’s because we don’t have many Black physicians, particularly Black male physicians. As an institution, we need to create an environment that is truly diverse, both in the faculty and in the population we serve. I know that we provide such wonderful care, but too often Black and Hispanic folks and people of other races don’t have the opportunity to receive it. Black and Hispanic patients combined are less than 15 percent of our patients. And yet, in New York City and the surrounding area, only 50 to 60 percent of the population is white, and the rest is Latinx, Black, Asian, and others. I’m not blaming MSK alone. But there is a lot that needs to be done in terms of creating services for people who should be coming to us at MSK. We should create a more ethical and equitable environment.”

RICHARD ELLIS
Director, Regulatory Oversight & Product Development
Clinical Research Administration
Research and Technology Management

“I’ve been at MSK for 21 years. I started as a session assistant, helping patients during visits, and advanced from there. For me, MSK is a wonderful place. I believe competence is valued, and I’ve had many advocates and mentors — often people who don’t look like me.

But MSK is not perfect, and it’s not immune to the discrimination and systemic racism that are part of the national dialogue, especially after the killing of George Floyd. I believe there should be more people of color as patients and leaders here. And I’ve seen talented people of color leave MSK. Issues of inclusion may have played some part. However, I’m an eternal optimist. I think there are many people of MSK whose hearts are in the right place and who recognize the richness that diversity adds and that it can make MSK even more successful. And I know from my own experience that there are leaders at MSK who are committed to making a difference. There will be soul-searching and sacrifices. But I believe that ultimately, we will come out of this time being a lot better.”

HOWAH HUNG
Lead Assistant General Counsel, Research and Technology Management

“I would encourage people to remember all flavors of diversity: racial, ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, gender, sexual orientation, and more. A person’s experiences with discrimination or tolerance can inform the way that person thinks and acts. For instance, I appreciate the welcoming environment at MSK, where I can proudly display candid photos of me and my husband. Previously, as a lawyer in private practice, I was hesitant to do things like that for fear of prejudice or castigation.

I identify as sexually fluid and as an American of Chinese descent; it’s good that diversity is top of mind these days. The Black Lives Matter movement is important because it encourages people to not tolerate discriminatory behavior, whether overt or passive, and it makes folks more vocal about identifying as allies.

I feel that there is not enough dialogue on what changes need to be made in society and the workplace to ensure that people of minority backgrounds feel comfortable and are able to overcome the biases they face. There needs to be more focus on action — not just awareness.

As one example in the LGBTQ space, an important issue we need to manage better is the proper care and treatment of our transgender patients as well as transgender staff.”

MARIA CANCIO
Pediatric Oncologist
Head of Clinical Operations, Stem Cell Transplantation and Cellular Therapies
Department of Pediatrics

“I grew up in a small town in Puerto Rico called Aguadilla. For generations, when my family has needed cancer care, we traveled to New York, to Memorial Sloan Kettering. When I was asked to join MSK, I was proud to join its long tradition of excellence and innovation.

One of my favorite aspects of working in New York is having the opportunity to meet people from all over the world. Patient and staff diversity foster an enhanced academic environment, as creativity and discovery come when people with different skills, experiences, and points of view meet to solve complex problems. I love learning from patients and seeing the strong bonds they form with staff — especially when they find someone they can identify and really connect with.

Sometimes that connection is formed through a shared language. I experienced that with an unforgettable couple — we bonded as fellow Spanish speakers. They even asked me to be the matron of honor at their wedding. By continuing to weave together this quilt that represents our community, we strengthen MSK.”

Photo: Karsten Moran

Photo: Karsten Moran

Photo: Karsten Moran

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Photo: Karsten Moran

Read more online: mskcc.org/fall-2020
YADIRA ROSEMIN
Associate Director, Outpatient Operations, MSK Ralph Lauren Center

“My mother is Puerto Rican and my father is Cuban. My ethnicity is a huge source of pride. It is rich in racial diversity and culture, but can also cause painful discrimination. I often wonder why we as humans tend to label other people and highlight differences instead of celebrating our similarities, even though we recognize that we all want the same thing — the best for ourselves and our loved ones. Perhaps it is the fear of the unknown.

Being the only nonwhite person in a meeting is common, and I wonder how that can be in 2020. Possibly because people reach out to colleagues that they have a relationship with, and those relationships are part of professional development and promotions. I don’t think a white colleague would feel the same way.

I moved recently from working in the Department of Neurosurgery to work at the MSK Ralph Lauren Center in Harlem. I live in Harlem, and the idea of serving my community is very exciting. This also means I can spend more time with our three daughters. I want to make sure they have the opportunity to compete with anyone, at the highest standards, like we have at MSK.”

MAMADOU DIALLO
Security Guard II (Memorial Hospital), Facilities Management

“I came to America from Guinea, in Africa, 15 years ago and have worked at MSK for nine years. When a new employee is hired and joins MSK, I make their ID card. I get to meet all kinds of people.

The killing of George Floyd was a tragedy and made me upset. It was clear the people who did it didn’t value human life. Just because someone has power does not mean they can kill a person like an animal.

I am Black and Muslim, and although I have not personally faced racism or discrimination, I think that the reason discrimination is such a problem in America is because people forget that everyone has a role to play in our society. Sometimes when people at MSK forget their ID cards, they say, ‘Don’t you know who I am?’ I tell them, ‘Yes, I know who you are, but there is a procedure we all have to follow.’ Too many people think the rules don’t apply to us all equally, but if you think of other people as part of the same team as you, you will treat them with respect.”

PATRICK SAMEDY
Associate Director, Quality and Safety Systems

“I grew up in New York City and the Long Island suburbs. The killing of George Floyd was painful. I’m not one to show much emotion, but I cried in front of my parents, wife, and children. Structures like the justice system — which are supposed to protect us — have very different outcomes for people like me.

I think more people are understanding that racism is not a figment of anyone’s imagination. Even in 2020, racism is very real. My work at MSK involves measuring patient outcomes and quality of care. I feel my work is valued by leadership, which I’m happy about. However, people should understand how isolating it can be as a minority in the workplace.

Are you an MSK student, staff person, or faculty member who wants to share your story? Get in touch at publicaffairs@mskcc.org.
The pair brainstormed and came up with an inspired solution: a drug called N-acetylcysteine, which is used to treat people with cystic fibrosis, a disorder of the lungs and digestive system. They thought that if the drug could help restore lung tissue in those patients, it might be able to help people with COVID-19 too.

They swiftly designed a clinical trial at MSK to test their theory. “Everyone here worked together to get this trial going quickly,” says the Institutional Review Board that approved the study to the nursing staff that were phoning him for advice: When would it be safe to have patients come in for treatment? With each call, he gave an honest answer: He didn’t know. But he also knew that wasn’t good enough. Drs. Vardhana and Wolchok were right to be concerned about their patients. Cancer therapies, especially chemotherapy, can lower a person’s immune defenses and make them susceptible to infections. “For many of our patients, cancer care was suspended,” says MSK Chief Medical Epidemiologist Mini Kamboj. “And rightly so, given the uncertainty of the situation.”

But cancer care can’t wait. MSK doctors felt the urgency to get answers about COVID-19 and safely resume treatments as soon as possible. “It was so palpable how little we knew in March going into April,” says Ying Taur, an infectious disease specialist. “We quickly began to strategize about how we could use our knowledge of the immune system and medicines that affected it to try and enhance the response to COVID-19,” Dr. Wolchok says.

“The course of disease and recovery is still not fully understood. We had to give patients time to make sure they didn’t go through another phase of illness,” says Chief Medical Epidemiologist Mini Kamboj.

Unmasking the Secrets of COVID-19

In March 2020, medical oncologist Santosh Vardhana was faced with a new challenge: Many of his patients with lymphoma were becoming infected with the COVID-19 virus. As he saw more cases, Dr. Vardhana noticed a troubling pattern begin to emerge. Patients were managing well through the initial stage of infection but then got progressively worse. Many of them suffered irreversible lung damage. “The longer they were sick with COVID-19, the harder it was for the immune system to fight back at all,” says Dr. Vardhana, who also conducts research in the lab of Memorial Sloan Kettering President and CEO Craig B. Thompson. “There was a desperate need to find a way to help them get better.”

Dr. Vardhana wondered if people with lymphoma were especially susceptible to the virus. Lymphoma is a disease of the body’s immune system — it cripples the very thing that fights off an infection such as COVID-19. He looked for clues in his patients’ blood tests. What he found was that while the cancer was suppressing one arm of the immune system, COVID-19 was depleting another part of it. This perfect storm is what was allowing the virus to persist, causing extreme damage to the lungs. Meanwhile, MSK immunologist and medical oncologist Jared Wolchok was thinking about this problem and how it intersected with MSK’s long-term commitment to studying immunotherapy and immunology.

“We quickly began to strategize about how we could use our knowledge of the immune system and medicines that affected it to try and enhance the response to COVID-19,” Dr. Wolchok says.

The study was published in June in Nature Medicine. Drs. Kamboj and Taur caution that there are still some questions. There was some evidence in their research that people treated with checkpoint inhibitors (which work by releasing the brakes on the immune system to attack cancer) had an increased risk of severe breathing problems. There is also a need for a deeper dive into patient outcomes for individual cancers.

Don’t Delay

As the pandemic surged in New York City in March, Drs. Vardhana and Wolchok were right to be concerned about their patients. Cancer therapies, especially chemotherapy, can lower a person’s immune defenses and make them susceptible to infections. “For many of our patients, cancer care was suspended,” says MSK Chief Medical Epidemiologist Mini Kamboj. “And rightly so, given the uncertainty of the situation.”

But cancer care can’t wait. MSK doctors felt the urgency to get answers about COVID-19 and safely resume treatments as soon as possible. “It was so palpable how little we knew in March going into April,” says Ying Taur, an infectious disease specialist. Colleagues at MSK and other institutions were phoning him for advice: When would it be safe to have patients come in for treatment? With each call, he gave an honest answer: He didn’t know. But he also knew that wasn’t good enough.

For many of our patients, cancer treatment was suspended,” says MSK Chief Medical Epidemiologist Mini Kamboj.

People should not delay cancer treatment [because of concerns about the virus].”

— Ying Taur

Unique Expertise

A COVID-19 infection still is complicated for people with cancer. It can cause a wide range of symptoms, from fever to inflammation to difficulty breathing. But MSK doctors are tackling these problems by applying lessons already learned from addressing similar symptoms caused by cancer or its treatments.

“Our experience in caring for people with cancer — and in how the immune system behaves — has given us ideas for how to overcome some of these challenges,” Dr. Vardhana says.

It’s understood in the medical community that some of what makes COVID-19 so damaging to the body is not just the infection itself. An overzealous immune system is also to blame — it works too hard and starts damaging the body. MSK specialists are familiar with this phenomenon. They’ve seen it occur in some people who receive a type of immunotherapy called chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T cell therapy.

CAR T cell therapy was pioneered at MSK, so doctors here are especially proficient at minimizing and treating an
To develop a vaccine against COVID-19, the worldwide scientific community first needs a clear picture of how the immune system responds to the virus. That response is often understood through antibody testing.

To an average person, a COVID-19 antibody test tells them whether they previously had the virus. To a scientist, antibody test results tell a deeper story. It’s like the difference between looking solely at a baseball team’s win-loss record, versus scrutinizing individual batting averages, home run totals, and strikeout rates in order to understand why the team isn’t making the playoffs.

At MSK, physician-scientist Michael Glickman and structural biologist Christobar Lima are committed to that deeper story behind a COVID-19 antibody test. They work with MSK’s Antibody & Bioresource Core Facility and Immune Monitoring Core Facility and started creating a COVID-19 antibody test in February.

Their test detects and measures three antibody types, one of which frequently blocks a virus from entering healthy cells. This is known as a neutralizing antibody. The most effective vaccines, such as those for polo and measles, stimulate the body to produce these types of antibodies, according to Dr. Glickman.

“A COVID-19 vaccine, when it’s created, will likely work by causing the body to produce neutralizing antibodies, as well as other types of immunity,” he says. “An antibody test like the one created by MSK could provide clues into what that effective response looks like.”

When a virus like COVID-19 enters the human body, the immune system responds instantly, with no time to lose.

As of mid-August, there were more than 130 publications related to COVID-19 from MSK researchers.

Moving Forward
But what about a vaccine? That’s the real hope for bringing COVID-19 under control.

As of mid-August, there were more than 130 publications related to COVID-19 from MSK researchers.

Kids with Cancer Are Not at an Increased Risk of COVID-19 Infection
In March and April, Andrew Kung led a study in MSK’s Department of Pediatrics that provided great reassurance to people concerned about COVID-19 in children with cancer. He and his collaborators found that children with cancer are no more likely than other kids to be affected by COVID-19. The research, published in May in JAMA Oncology, was the first in the United States concerning COVID-19 in children with cancer.

“Despite some fears that children might be a reservoir of COVID-19 infection, we found that kids have lower rates of infection than adults,” says Dr. Kung, Chair of the Department of Pediatrics.

The study came to another encouraging conclusion: If kids with cancer did become infected with COVID-19, they typically had only mild symptoms, did not have to be hospitalized, and were able to recover at home.

Dr. Kung says these findings allow for a sigh of relief: “This means we can continue lifesaving cancer therapy with standard precautions and safeguards but without heightened concern about adverse outcomes due to COVID-19 infection.”

The expertise has helped enormously as we try to prevent similar damage in the most severe cases.

Andrew Kung says the findings of his recent study helped ease the fears of those concerned about COVID-19 infection in children with cancer.

As of mid-August, there were more than 130 publications related to COVID-19 from MSK researchers.

The Society of Memorial Sloan Kettering announced that its 2019-2020 net fundraising efforts totaled more than $5.6 million, which is consistent with recent years. Over the next year, the group expects to provide more than $2.7 million in support of MSK’s various research needs — specifically, in furthering the institution’s pediatric precision medicine initiatives and providing funding for new ideas pursued by junior investigators and Sloan Kettering Institute researchers. Additionally, the Society’s patient care initiatives totaled more than $1.2 million; the largest portion of this budget benefits access to care as well as provides emergency financial assistance to patients in need.

The 2020-2021 Society Campaign will focus on supporting patient care, research, and education at MSK. “Now, more than ever, Society funding is needed to accelerate leading-edge research at MSK,” says Kate Allen, President of The Society. She also notes the need to support MSK’s patients when they are most vulnerable and to enable their access to MSK’s standard-setting care: “The focus of our 2020-2021 campaign acknowledges the circumstances our patients and staff face and highlights how The Society is uniquely positioned to help.”

The Society of Memorial Sloan Kettering, founded in 1946, is a volunteer-led organization within MSK dedicated to promoting the well-being of patients, supporting cancer research, and providing public education on the early prevention, detection, and treatment of cancer.

MSK COVID-19 Fund was established in April in response to the desire of so many in our community to help during the crisis. Thanks to more than 3,000 donors, Board members, and MSK employees, the fund has raised more than $6.2 million — making a crucial difference for MSK patients and staff. Every gift is driving research and treatment forward, supporting our staff, and allowing MSK to continue providing exceptional care to our patients.

We’re grateful for this outpouring of generosity and are proud to report on the impact of these donations across three funding areas.

Greatest Needs
As global demand for critical supplies accelerated, some prices for medical supplies rose to nearly 40 times their standard cost. Philanthropy helped MSK purchase personal protective equipment and other essentials needed to keep patients and staff safe. At the height of the crisis in New York City, MSK was using record numbers of masks, gloves, gowns, and more.

Research and Innovation
Donors helped MSK quickly shift certain aspects of our research infrastructure in order to understand and combat COVID-19 in the context of our patients with cancer. Contributions also helped expand digital technology capabilities so that thousands of people could receive care at home through telemedicine, and hospitalized patients could stay connected to loved ones.

Employee Relief
MSK employees — our healthcare heroes — are living with many affects of the pandemic, including financial hardship. Donations have allowed more than 3,000 MSK staff members to receive grants for essential expenses.

To learn how you can join the MSK Giving community and make an impact, visit giving.mskcc.org.
APPOINTMENTS AND PROMOTIONS

Sofia Haque
Neuroendocrinologist
Promoted to Clinical Member; Department of Radiology, Neuroendocrine Disease

Attia Khan
Radiation Oncologist
Promoted to Member; Memorial Hospital; Department of Radiation Oncology; External Beam Radiation Therapy Service; New Jersey (Central)

Minsuk Lee
Chemical Biologist
Promoted to Member; Cancer Biology & Genetics Program; Sloan Kettering Institute

Christine Mayr
Molecular and Cell Biologist
Promoted to Member; Cancer Biology & Genetics Program; Sloan Kettering Institute

Scott Keeney and Christopher Lima Elected to National Academy of Sciences

In April, Scott Keeney and Christopher Lima were elected to the National Academy of Sciences.

Scott Keeney (left), a member of the Molecular Biology Program and a Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) investigator, studies DNA double-strand breaks and the mechanisms of meiotic recombination.

Dr. Lima (right), Chair of the Structural Biology Program and an HHMI investigator, studies the macromolecules that carry out posttranslational protein modification and RNA processing.

INAUGURAL KRAVIS WISE AWARDS SUPPORT FEMALE SCIENTISTS

MSK has established the Marie-Josée Kravis Women in Science Endeavor (WISE) to provide financial and professional support to scientists pursuing biomedical research at MSK, pledging its commitment to gender equity in science and paving the way for more women to become leaders in their field.

Graduate Fellowship Winner
Sahana Rao is a fourth-year PhD student in the Tri-Institutional Chemical Biology Program, a collaboration among Memorial Sloan Kettering, The Rockefeller University, and Weill Cornell Medicine.

Postdoctoral Fellowship Winner
Linda Miles, a postdoctoral fellow in MSK’s Human Oncology and Pathogenesis Program, studies the genetics of blood cancers.

MSK KUDOS

Charles Sawyers (left) was named President-Elect of the American Association for Cancer Research Academy for 2020-21.

Cameron Brennan, Marc Ladanyi, Francisco Sanchez-Vega, and Nikolaus Schultz received the Team Science Award from the American Association for Cancer Research.

Janice Reid received the 2020 Community Service Award from the Caribbean Nurses Association.

Anthony Daniyan, Melody Smith, Daniel Prince, and Tracy-Ann Moo were named winners of the 2020 Internal Diversity Enhancement Award.

Marcel van den Brink was elected to the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, or KNAW).

Vinod Balachandran, Lydia Finley, and Andrea Schietinger were named 2020 Pershing Square Sohn Prize for Young Investigators in Cancer Research winners.

Cornellius Taabazuing was elected to the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (Koninklijke Nederlandse Academie van Wetenschappen, or KNAW).

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On June 18, Memorial Sloan Kettering streamed a special performance of stories written by MSK patients as part of the Visible Ink writing program. It was the 12th annual performance and the first presented virtually.

Visible Ink enables MSK patients, survivors, and caregivers to write on any topic in any form with the individual support of an experienced writing mentor. This year, writers focused on their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pieces, ranging from heartfelt to humorous, were read aloud by icons of Broadway, television, and film.

Daytime Emmy Award-winning actress Susan Lucci read patient Mary Shannon Little’s sardonic “Dear Corona,” an admiring letter from cancer to the virus, complimenting its deadliness but warning that its time is short: “Enjoy fame and fear while it’s yours […] Something more lethal will always come along — like climate change. I think that guy’s got legs.”

Diane Baker, a Golden Globe- and Emmy Award-nominated actress, read “Lessons Learned” by Claire Harris Tunick about how living in quarantine reinforced the same lessons learned while dealing with cancer: the importance of friendships, love of family, and empathy. “All in all, I’ve learned that there is much to be gained from loss.”

Visible Ink, supported solely by grants and donations, was founded in 2008 by the program’s director, Judith Kelman.

Learn more at giving.mskcc.org/visible-ink