

Clinical trials to open this fall at TMH Cancer Center

Marina Brown, Democrat correspondent 6:38 p.m. EDT October 17, 2016



(Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

Dr. Karen Russell, M.D., FACP, Tallahassee Medical Oncologist, is very clear.

“You can’t have a Cancer Center without research.” Therefore, a year ago, the prospect of Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare Cancer Center’s expansion into research and clinical trials was a large factor in drawing the accomplished physician to Tallahassee.

Though Russell is a graduate of Furman University, the University of Miami Medical School, with specialized training at Duke University in Hematology and Oncology. She is also from an area and family where medical care was hard to come by.

“We were not a rich family,” says Russell, who spent 13 years on active duty in the Navy after receiving her medical training on a military scholarship. “When family members became ill, innovative care was not available to them.”

Russell sees the delivery of cutting edge medical services even to those without good insurance as an important feature of her desire to serve. The inclusion of any eligible patient in clinical trials which will soon become a part of TMH Cancer Center’s spectrum, she says, is exciting and welcome news.

Open since 2011, the Cancer Center’s goal had always been to include a research component. Now, in just a few weeks, the Center will begin research trials, which will focus on lung and breast cancers, ovarian cancer, and observational studies on melanomas. Russell says that by the end of 2017, she expects there will be 20 studies up and running. But studies that will demonstrate the efficacy of a drug or method to treat cancers safely need lots of planning, collaborations, volunteers— and time.

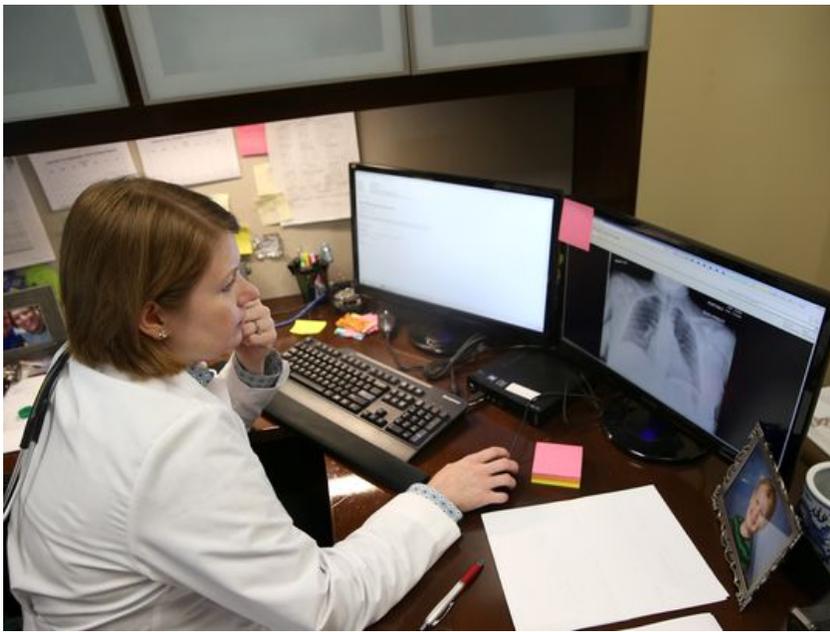
“It easily takes 10 or more years for a drug to be created at the lab level, brought into animal studies, identified as showing “signals” of efficacy and then provided for human trials. At that point, another five or more years are needed to establish that drug’s ability to combat the cancer compared to the current standard of care.”

Each of the drugs that will be used in the trials shows promise for advancing that standard.



Tallahassee Memorial Healthcare (Photo: Courtesy photo)

Russell points to Tallahassee Memorial Cancer Center’s collaborators as of the first tier. “UFHealth in Gainesville is part of four to six national clinical trial groups sponsored by the National Cancer Institute. Our Center will be a satellite of their established program and expand their research area.”



Dr. Karen Russell, a cancer and hematology specialist at Tallahassee Memorial Hospital, displays an x-ray of cancerous lungs in her office at the Cancer Center of the hospital on Wednesday, Sept. 28, 2016. (Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

Another research partner will be Florida State University's Medical School. "We plan to work with them not only in cancer therapies per se, but in social sciences like psychology and cognitive issues pertaining to cancer."

One study will involve the changes seen on MRI of patients before and after chemo. These are patients who suffer from so-called, "chemo brain", the sometimes loss of short-term memory.

And finally, the researchers at the Cancer Center will collaborate with pharmaceutical makers like Bristol-Meyers Squibb and Roche. Following Phase I studies, which establish clinically safe doses, Russell says that companies are required to complete Phase II and III studies, which are aimed at specific tumor types and need expanded numbers of volunteers.

"There will be two drug trials on aggressive forms of breast cancer called "triple negative" carcinomas. These types are commonly related to the BRCA gene cancers. After surgery, the risk of recurrence is greater because drugs to prevent reappearance of the cancer are not effective."

A second study involves a chemotherapeutic agent targeting over-expressed antibodies, which will be taken up directly into the cell.

From lung cancer trials involving the body's own immune system to colon cancer and metastatic breast cancer studies, TMH Cancer Center will begin enrolling patients this fall. "The fact that patients will not have to go far away to be involved in national and soon, even international studies, which provide more options for care, is wonderful," says Russell.

With five full-time and two part-time hematology and oncology physicians, three radiation oncologists, two gynecological oncologists; one surgical oncologist, and many support staff, Russell says that the exponential growth from its creation in 2011 until now is remarkable for a center like Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare's.

"There is a real commitment to providing every opportunity for not only innovative new therapies but for doing it right here in this community," Russell says. She wishes her own family had these opportunities and is thrilled to be able to provide them now.

For inclusion in a study at TMH Cancer Center patients may be referred by their physician, or self-referred. There is a website at: TMH.ORG/CancerTrials or by telephone: 850-431-0673, for more information on eligibility. When asked how long each trial might last, Russell says that a trial "would last as long as the treatment is working... the drug company will keep it open."

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