

GRU Cancer Center is making strides

By Samir N. Khleif, M.D.

Guest Columnist

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Since joining the Georgia Regents University Cancer Center a little over a year ago, my goal has been to build on current strengths as we work to become a National Cancer Institute-designated cancer center and another source of excellence in care for the state and region.

Thanks to the support of many, we are well on our way.

In his 2014 budget, Gov. Nathan Deal focuses on education and economic development – and health care. The governor firmly reiterated his support for the Georgia Regents University Cancer Center by doubling his budgetary support for our cancer research program, from \$5 million last year to \$10 million this year.

WITH \$45 MILLION in bond funding slated for fiscal year 2014 to help construct a new comprehensive cancer center building, and \$2.5 million to help upgrade the state's cancer tissue bio-repository, the governor, the legislature and the state has made it clear that the health of the citizens of this state is a priority – and that the GRU Cancer Center's success, now and in the future, reflects on us as a community and a state. With an estimated 97 new cases of cancer diagnosed each day in Georgia, according to the Georgia Division of Public Health, the need is greater than ever.

Another priority is National Cancer Institute designation for our cancer center. NCI designation is the gold standard for academic cancer programs. The journey toward this designation brings with it an array of new research, clinical services and prevention strategies. It also attracts top-level clinicians, scientists and biotechnology companies. Consider this: Georgia currently has only one of the 67 NCI-designated cancer centers in the country (the Winship Cancer Institute at Emory University). Most states with similar populations have two or three.

And we continue to make strides toward our goal, including attracting a number of leading physician-scientists and researchers to GRU and its Cancer Center. These leaders in their fields are leveraging their talents in understanding the biology of cancer, drug development, clinical trials and specific cancers – including brain tumors, melanoma and leukemia – cancer surgery, radiation and more.

We have increased our available clinical trials and grown stronger in basic research – all with the intent of better understanding the cancers affecting citizens of this state and region and developing and providing innovative therapies sooner.

These trials include promising new treatments that are the first in the nation, providing a huge advantage and convenient access for patients here. In addition, sites around the country are expressing interest in partnering with us to launch similar trials at their institutions.

Over the past year, we have also worked to put a new integrated clinical care system in place. Our cancer center clinics are now multidisciplinary – a unique patient-centered model of care unlike any other in this region. A key component of these clinics is our nurse navigator program. These nurses usher patients throughout their treatments.

NEW CLINICS ARE focusing on brain tumors and genetic counseling, along with specialized clinics for Phase I trials and immunotherapy, which offer novel advanced investigational treatments. Our holistic care also involves secondary therapies such as music and art to help mitigate the emotional, social and spiritual effects of cancer.

In addition, our cancer information service hotline serves as this region's cancer resource for the public.

Together, we've achieved much over the past year, and we continue to need you to be part of our future. From

health care workers to scientists, from the business community to public servants to citizens throughout the state, your support is vital in building a new, nationally prominent cancer center – one that provides access to comprehensive and innovative treatments throughout our state and beyond.

(The writer is director of the Georgia Regents University Cancer Center.)

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