2012: A Year of Accomplishments at Albany Med

A Message from Albany Med President Jim Barba

“Every day, remarkable events occur within our walls in patient care, medical research, education and training. As 2012 comes to a close, it is appropriate to pause and recognize the exceptional scope of work happening at this institution. The people who make up the Albany Med community continue to push the boundaries of excellence in every arena.

“The overview provided in this edition of Albany Med Today includes some of the recognitions we have received for our work and highlights select advances made this year. What we can’t begin to capture in print is the extraordinary difference we make in people’s lives every day. Albany Med truly is known for our expertise and chosen for our care.”

Please turn to page 3 for a list of 2012 highlights.

“The Solitaire device, the latest weapon for treating stroke, became available this year locally only at Albany Med. See story on Page 2.

In October, Albany Medical Center became the largest single enrollment site for a landmark cancer study.

Patients who had mechanical heart pumps implanted were united at a reception to celebrate life and their success at overcoming the challenge of heart disease. Thanks to newly available specialized heart pumps, they are enjoying a higher quality of life.

Research at Albany Medical College continues to thrive. Dr. Damian Shin, above, published research on an amino acid that could be used as a future epilepsy treatment.

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Graduate medical education refers to the training period that occurs after physicians receive their medical degrees and includes residencies and fellowships. 

Albany Med's exemplary compliance with the ACGME's requirements was measured through a lengthy institutional review which included extensive documentation and a site visit earlier this year. The accreditation process confirmed that Albany Med demonstrates proper oversight and management of 35 graduate medical programs that train residents in such specialties as internal medicine, emergency medicine, anesthesiology and pediatrics, among many others.
New Book Focuses on Young People with Cancer

As she was writing part of her fantasy science fiction book series, Janine Cammarata hit a roadblock.

“I was writing fiction, but non-fiction stuff kept popping into my head,” she said. “I knew that that I had to stop everything else and write it.”

In fact, she is living the “non-fiction stuff”: the mother of a patient who was treated at Albany Med’s Children’s Hospital, she shares the stories of her son Nick and other cancer patients. Once strangers, these kids are eternally linked by their battle with a terrible disease.

“I got very connected to all the families and really hoped for these young adults to heal,” said Cammarata, the president of the Nick’s Fight to be Healed Foundation. “A lot of them reminded me of my son.”

Nick was just 13 when he lost his fight with leukemia. Luke Romano, another of the young adults whose story Janine tells, was only 17 when he died. Her book, What Makes Them Amazing: Inspiring Stories of Young Adults Fighting Cancer, shares special moments from the lives of Nick and Luke, as well as seven others ages 13 to 24 who are still battling on. Cammarata said the determination and the selfless caring shown by those affected are truly inspiring.

“Quite a few of them have relapsed, and despite having to face some pretty hard obstacles, I’ve learned the importance of the support system,” said Cammarata. “They just want to do something for other children too.”

Cath Lab Employee Reflects on 43 Years at Albany Med

After several decades working on the leading-edge of cardiac medicine, medical imaging technologist Noreen Laviska is now looking forward to a decidedly less high-tech pastime—learning to spin wool and weave with her husband, a retired dairy farmer. Laviska is retiring this fall from Albany Med’s cardiovascular catheterization lab after 43 years of service.

Laviska, who was born and raised in a small town in New Hampshire, arrived at Albany Med in 1964 to study in the X-ray technician program. After working in general radiology for four years, in 1969 she applied for a job in the cardiac catheterization lab after 43 years of service.

Laviska’s colleagues said they have always known her to be supportive.

“Her job significance made her job easier, she said.

“The field of radiology has changed tremendously since she first entered the field. In the early days, she says X-ray cameras were large and difficult to place in the exact position necessary. Smaller, more portable equipment made her job easier, she said.

One of the most dramatic changes was the invention of digital radiology, which eliminated the use of X-ray film and the time-consuming and chemically intensive darkroom process.

“These are the people who are doing the work,” said John A. Balint, MD, professor of medicine and chair of the department of Medicine in 1981.

The two became not just colleagues but good friends.

“Noreen was the consummate professional,” said her sister, daughter and niece are also in the radiology field. “I am so proud of them. I guess you could say this work runs in our family,” she said.

“Digital X-ray technology made a big difference in the cath lab,” she said. “We used to use as much as 500 feet of film for each procedure.”

She is especially proud that she was part of the team of Julie Sosa, MD, when he invented the Sona Contrast Delivery System, which eliminated the danger of air bubbles developing in the dye solution used in the cardiac catheterization procedure.

Laviska’s colleagues said they have always known her to be supportive.

“Frank Luna, a cardiovascular tech who worked with Laviska for 27 years, said that no matter how busy and demanding the work was, “Noreen was always the calm voice of reason that we could depend on.”

Colleague Debbie Barbaro credited Laviska with bringing her to Albany Med in 2005. “They first met when a member of Barbara’s family was treated in the cath lab,” she said. “The procedure went well, and Noreen was so warm and professional that I decided I wanted a career at Albany Med too,” she said.

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Melodies’ Builds Lasting Connections

When the final curtain fell on Melodies of Christmas 2011, Bob and Megan Sheridan thought it might be the Melodies finals for their family as well. After all, their son, Ian, a singer for the past 11 years, was a high school senior. Once he graduated and went off to college, they thought he would have to give it up.

But Ian wasn’t so sure.

“Of course I said no,” said the SUNY Oswego freshman, who has been a patient at the Melodies Center for Childhood Cancer and Blood Disorders since he was 3-and-a-half. “I absolutely love being a part of the Melodies of Christmas. I honestly plan on coming back each year until they tell me I can’t.”

Ian is one of many of the veterans of the show who participate in this holiday tradition as a way to help others get the same expert and compassionate care they received.

“I will never forget the nurses and doctors who saved my life. When I was sick with leukemia, I had so much support from others and I do my best to give back. The feeling is phenomenal,” Ian said.

Sixteen-year-old Hayley Mattice shares that feeling. She became a Melodies singer in 2001, the same year she was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

“By being part of Melodies, I am able to represent something much bigger than myself. Our singers support barbershop and stage, she said. "When I am on stage with the other Silent Night singers, I feel so strong because I am standing amongst the strongest people I have ever met.”

Nick Bowen, 25 years old, is the senior member of the Melodies singers. He saw his first Melodies show while he was undergoing his first round of chemotherapy for an inoperable brain tumor. He remembers his mother’s tears that night.

“She was crying tears of joy for the survivors, tears of sadness for those who had passed, and tears of hope for kids like me,” he remembers.

Just a few years later, Nick walked proudly onto the stage as a Melodies singer, a place he’s now found since 2003, saying he feels so much gratitude toward those who have helped him, and is honored to be able to give back.

The Melodies of Christmas has created a bond between singers that is less about the diseases they’ve suffered and more about the family they’ve become.

“It’s a connection that makes the Melodies of Christmas an unforgettable holiday tradition.

This year’s Melodies of Christmas performances are December 20-23 at Proctor’s Theatre in Schenectady. For tickets, please visit the Proctor’s Theatre box office, www.Proctors.org, or call 518-346-2204.

Through the generosity of our partners, CBS 6, Freihofer’s, and Price Chopper, as well as that of our loyal audiences, the 35 years of Melodies of Christmas performances have raised $6,494,394 in support of the children and programs of the Melodies Center at Albany Med.

Holiday Gala Set for December 7

The 29th annual Dancing in the Woods, a black-tie gala to benefit the Melodies Center for Childhood Cancer and Blood Disorders at the Children’s Hospital, will take place at 9pm Friday, Dec. 7 on the 7th floor of the Rensselaer Center in Menands. The evening features a beautiful array of specialty foods and desserts, champagne, and live music by the New York Playboys. For ticket prices and more information, visit www.amc.edu/foundation or call the Albany Medical Center Foundation at (518) 262-3522.

Annual Lecture to Focus on ‘Genetic Theory of Infectious Diseases’

Albany Medical College and the Center for Immunology (CIIMD) and Microbial Disease will present the 2012 Thobald Smith Annual Lecture at 4pm Friday, Dec. 7 in ME-708: “Toward a Genetic Theory of Infectious Diseases” will be presented by Jean-Luca Casanova, MD, PhD, professor at The Rockefeller University in New York City and head of the St. Giles Laboratory of Human Genetics of Infectious Diseases, and an attending physician at Rockefeller University Hospital. The event is hosted by Dennis Metzger, PhD, professor and Thobald Smith Alumni Chair and director of the CIIMD. For more information, call (518) 262-6750.

This annual lecture, presented as a forum for talks by eminent scientists, is named for Dr. Thobald Smith (Class of 1883), one of Albany Med’s most renowned graduates, who is credited with discovering that insects are able to transmit diseases to humans, thus “unlocking the mysteries of yellow fever, malaria and other viral parasitic illnesses.”

Dr. John Balint Receives “Living the Legacy” Award

John A. Balint, MD, professor of medicine and founder of the bioethics program at Albany Medical College, was honored with the Whitemyer M. Young, Jr. Health Center’s 2012 “Living the Legacy” award. The award recognizes individuals who have exhibited a strong belief in education as a tool to a better life, who believe that social justice and fairness are paramount to a just society, and who reach out to advocates to find common ground. Dr. Balint joined the faculty of Albany Medical College in 1963 as head of the Division of Gastroenterology. He became chair of the Department of Medicine in 1981. Fourteen years later, he developed the Center for Medical Ethics Education and Research (now the Alden March Bioethics Institute).
Large-scale Fire Drill Keeps Albany Med Prepared for the Unexpected

Using a large-scale drill that simulated multiple fire scenarios in operating room settings, Albany Med in October took on its ongoing efforts to prepare for disasters an important step further.

Involving more than 100 people, the October drill brought together operating room staff, the anesthesia department, surgeons, residents, risk management specialists and staff from the Department of Environmental Health and Safety as well as Emergency Management. The deputy fire chief from the Albany Fire Department was also on hand to observe and provide feedback.

“We do smaller-scale drills on a regular basis, but this was one of the largest and most complex fire drill to date,” said Scott Heller, director of emergency management.

With four fire scenarios going on simultaneously in 12 different ORs and mimicking-playing the roles of patients, Heller said that each team responded appropriately to activate fire response systems. And, while the fire department was not brought in on site, Heller said each team responded appropriately to activate fire response systems. And, while the fire department was not brought in on site, Heller said that each team responded appropriately to activate fire response systems.

Exiting the event took tremendous preparation. Heller worked with Clinical Nurse Specialist Heather Boyle, Risk Manager Neda Nairkar, and Safety Coordinator and Fire Marshal Joe Conway to develop scenarios, brief senior or evaluators, as well as staff members who would be involved in the drill.

A new study provides the first clear evidence that vision or eye problems are rarely the cause of recurring headaches in children, even if the headache usually occurs when the child is doing work for schools or other visual tasks. Many parents assume that frequent headaches mean their child needs glasses, but they ask their doctor to refer their child for an eye exam. This study was conducted by pediatric ophthalmologists at Albany Medical Center and was presented at the 116th Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Ophthalmology in Chicago.

In this retrospective study, which was conducted at the ophthalmology clinic of Albany Med, researchers reviewed the medical records of 158 children under age 18 who were seen at the clinic for frequent headaches from 2002 to 2011. All of the children received complete eye exams by the clinic’s pediatric ophthalmologists.

No significant correlation was found between their frequent headaches and their need for vision correction. The researchers reached this conclusion by comparing the results of the clinic’s exams of the children with headaches to the records of their previous eye exams and other referrals to medical care. Eye health and vision test results remained unchanged from earlier exams for 75 percent of the children. Also, children who already had eyeglasses were not found to need new prescriptions at the time they were seen at the Albany Med study:

Children’s Headaches Rarely Indicate a Need for Eyeglasses

Plastic surgeon Ashish Patel, MD, has treated numerous patients for a variety of animal bites, but when 25-year-old Daniel Beck came to the Plastic Surgery Clinic at Albany Med with an alligator bite, it was definitely a first.

“During my training, I spent time in South Africa, and I never even saw anything remotely close to what I saw in Ohio. I really didn’t expect to see my first alligator bite in Albany, New York,” Insas Patel, an assistant professor of plastic surgery and attending surgeon.

In all seriousness, however, Patel said Beck was extremely lucky. He still has full function of his right arm even after a 7-foot alligator took hold of it during a live reptile show in Ohio. Patel has been erasing Beck since August when Beck came to Rotterdam to recuperate at his mother’s home.

“Beck, a 2006 graduate of Schalmont High School, works as an animal trainer and wildlife educator in Hollywood, FL. He began traveling nationally this past spring with the “Kachunga and the Alligator Show.”

Afterward, in a debriefing, staff members shared their experiences and evaluators, as well as staff members who would be involved in the drill.

“The show is fun,” he said. “It’s not real fun, but simulations conducted under the watch of monitors and evaluators, as well as staff members who watched the drill live-streamed from another room.

Afterward, in a debriefing, staff members shared lessons learned.

Staff in the OR practice emergency procedures.

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While the Patient Pavilion under construction on New Scotland Avenue will enhance the care we deliver for our patients, a second construction project nearing completion will enhance the environment by powering the Medical Center with state-of-the-art, fuel-efficient technology.

Albany Med is the first hospital in the region to install a cogeneration plant, one that not only efficiently generates power and reduces emissions but also uses the heat that is typically lost or wasted by conventional power plants.

Because it is so efficient, the new system will deliver enormous cost savings over time. The plant is expected to pay for itself within seven years and to save Albany Med nearly $70 million over the next 20 years.

“’It’s a win-win proposition for both Albany Med and the environment,” said Emilio Genzano, assistant vice president of engineering and construction.

Genzano said the “cogen” plant, which is now in the final test phase, is designed to reduce emissions to a minimum by channeling exhaust from the turbines through a cleansing stack.

Fueled by natural gas, the plant will produce electricity to power all systems throughout the medical center. The waste heat will be recycled and used to create steam for sterilization and hot water. It will provide 80 percent of the Medical Center’s power needs in the winter and 50 percent in the summer.

Supported by a $2 million grant from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA), the 20,000-square-foot, 4.6 megawatt cogen plant is located behind the Medical College along Myrtle Avenue.

One advantage of having an on-site cogen plant is that less energy is lost because it is distributed right here at the Medical Center, rather than being transmitted from a centralized power plant a long distance away, Genzano said.

“Whether it’s through our numerous recycling programs or building this plant, Albany Med is committed to doing our part to preserve our environment,” he said.