International Study Affirms Benefits of Stroke Treatment Practiced Regionally Only at Albany Med

A stroke treatment offered regionally only at Albany Med has been recognized internationally for dramatically improving the likelihood that patients will recover from stroke.

Albany Med neurosurgeons began using the “Solitaire” clot-removal system in March 2012, as soon as it was approved by the FDA.

Solitaire is a small, stent-like tube that is threaded to the brain using a catheter, where it is opened and able to “grab” a clot that is inhibiting blood flow, a condition known as ischemic stroke. Ischemic stroke occurs when a blood vessel that carries oxygen and nutrients to the brain is blocked by a clot.

Since Albany Med neurosurgeons adopted the Solitaire treatment approach, multiple studies have demonstrated that patients suffering from ischemic stroke who are treated with a clot-removing device have a much higher level of functional independence three months following treatment compared to patients treated only with a clot-dissolving drug, the current standard of care at most hospitals in the U.S.

“This landmark trial is likely to change the standard of care for many stroke patients in the future,” said Alan Boulos, MD ’94, endovascular neurosurgeon and chairman of the Department of Neurosurgery.

Over the last three years, Albany Med’s neurosurgery team has been involved in a separate study of this innovative treatment that was recently halted because of the positive findings of the European study. These findings were presented at the American Heart Association/American Stroke Association’s International Stroke Conference in February and submitted for publication to the New England Journal of Medicine.

“Albany Med is proud to be a local leader in this treatment approach, which has dramatically improved our ability to safely and quickly open vessels in the brain and allow significantly better outcomes for many stroke patients,” said Dr. Boulos.

“Over the last three years, we have performed numerous endovascular treatments to remove clots, and developed the imaging, technology, nursing, technician and physician expertise to manage these complicated patients at all times of the day and night.”

Don’t Skip Colorectal Cancer Screenings, Albany Med Expert Says

During National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month in March, Albany Medical Center’s experts are speaking out on the critical importance of colorectal screenings for detecting cancer.

“These screenings save lives,” said gastroenterologist Seth Richter, MD, director of endoscopy at Albany Med’s Digestive Disease Center.

Each year nearly 137,000 people in the U.S. are diagnosed with colorectal cancer (CRC), and more than 50,000 people die from it annually. The disease, however, is largely preventable with regular screening and is treatable with early detection.

“Colorectal cancer screening should be a part of routine health care for people starting at age 50,” said Dr. Richter, who received his fellowship training at Memorial Sloan-Kettering and whose practice at Albany Med focuses on colon cancer prevention, screenings and treatment.

“Colorectal cancers almost always develop from precancerous polyps, or abnormal growths, in the colon or rectum,” Dr. Richter said.

“Screening tests can find polyps, which can be removed before they turn into cancer. Screening tests also can find colorectal cancer early, when treatment works best and the chance for a full recovery is very high.”

Albany Med’s Digestive Disease Center offers the full range of colorectal cancer screenings and treatments. They include colonoscopy, which is considered the gold standard for CRC screening by the American Cancer Society; fecal occult blood test (FOBT), stool test or fecal immunochemical test (FIT); and flexible sigmoidoscopy, which evaluates the lower third of the colon with an endoscope.

“Exercise and eating healthy foods, such as vegetables and fruit, can help decrease the risk of CRC,” Dr. Richter said, “but screening is an essential part of prevention. It’s one of the smartest health decisions a person can make.”
Pathologist’s Pioneering Work Holds Promise for Cancer Patients

New research led by Albany Medical College pathologist Jeffrey Ross, MD, indicates that genomic profiling, or the process of determining alterations in individual cancer-related genes, could offer new treatment options for people with widespread cancer where the primary origin is unknown.

More than 30,000 patients in the U.S. each year have a cancer whose primary site is never identified. There are no FDA-approved therapies for these patients, with patient response rates to treatment averaging only 20 percent. Survival beyond two years of diagnosis is very rare.

While researchers traditionally seek to locate the primary site of these cancers in the hope of unlocking treatment options, Dr. Ross and his colleagues have, instead, chosen to sequence the cancer-related genes driving the tumors in patients diagnosed with cancer of unknown primary origin, or CUP.

In studies published in the inaugural issue of JAMA Oncology in February, data from a study of 200 individuals diagnosed with CUP identified clinically relevant genomic alterations in 85 percent of patients, many of which could be associated with approved anti-cancer drugs.

“The hope is to match these mutations to clinical treatments that are already available,” said Dr. Ross, Cyrus Strong Merrill Professor and chair of the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine.

They were supported, shortly thereafter, by anesthesiologist Philip Hansen, MD, who cleared Coughlin’s airway; Assistant Nurse Manager Julie Washington, RN, who assisted Pettinelli with chest compressions; Tsungani Clemons, RN, Jennifer Coppola, RN, Rachel Leibson, RN, Alexandra Obisewski, RN, Laurie Sentz, RN, Natasha Valenti, RN, and Patient Care Associate Sierra Williams, who kept the unit running during the emergency.

Their collective work in the moments it took for the “code blue” resuscitation team to reach the unit helped revive Coughlin, who had no pulse and was not breathing when CPR was initiated. The nurses in the unit frequently run practice drills to be ready for just this sort of situation.

Coughlin is now at home, happily enjoying his time as a new grandparent. “I wasn’t frightened by the experience,” he said. “I knew I was in good hands. And the care I received at Albany Med after the initial heart attack was also outstanding. I tell my wife, if we had one extra red light on our way to Albany Med, I might not be here today.”
Albany Med Initiative to Combat Hypertension Sees Big Gains

EARLY DIAGNOSIS AND COORDINATION WITH COMMUNITY’S PRIMARY CARE PHYSICIANS ARE KEYS TO SUCCESS

Patients with high blood pressure who are seen by an Albany Med physician are nearly twice as likely to have their condition under control compared to patients with hypertension nationwide, thanks to a program developed at Albany Med more than two years ago.

Working across specialties and in collaboration with community physicians, Albany Med physicians closely monitor and manage the blood pressure for every one of the hundreds of thousands of patients they see every year, regardless of whether the condition they are being treated for relates to hypertension.

Calling hypertension a “silent killer,” cardiologist Ferdinand Venditti, MD, vice dean for clinical affairs and head of the Albany Med Faculty Physicians group, said hypertension can be debilitating if left untreated.

He noted that hypertension impacts more than one in three Americans and is a leading cause of strokes, heart attacks and other serious illnesses.

Through the initiative, Albany Med’s more than 450 physicians notify a patient’s primary care physician if high blood pressure is found during their visit, regardless of the reason the patient was seen at Albany Med. The physicians then work with the primary care doctor to develop a coordinated treatment plan.

Since adopting these protocols in 2012, the percentage of Albany Med patients diagnosed with hypertension who were able to lower their blood pressure through treatment rose to 90 percent in 2014 from 66 percent in 2012. According to the American Heart Association, in 2013 only 52 percent of Americans with hypertension nationwide had it under control.

Arif Asif, MD, Thomas Ordway Distinguished Professor of Medicine at Albany Medical College and chief of Nephrology and Hypertension, praised the initiative’s success. “Albany Med has made the detection and treatment of hypertension a priority in every area of our practice,” he said. “It’s making a significant difference for our patients.”

New Incubator Will Help Businesses Discover and Develop Breakthrough Biotechnologies

A new business incubator located on the Albany Medical Center campus will help businesses discover and develop breakthrough biotechnologies that will improve patient care and promote economic growth.

At an announcement in February, entrepreneurs, venture capitalists and others involved in start-up businesses learned about the Biomedical Acceleration and Commercialization Center (BACC) at Albany Medical College, a tax-free area under the START-UP NY program established by Governor Andrew M. Cuomo to encourage businesses to relocate to or expand within New York State.

The BACC will target businesses in biomedicine, bioengineering, biotechnology and pharmaceuticals, and provide entrepreneurs with an environment where they can refine their technology, gain access to a variety of resources and facilities, and connect with researchers and practitioners who can help grow their business.

Expected to open in the spring, the BACC will be housed in the S-Building, located at the back of the Medical College.

Conference Focuses on Optimizing Medical Care and Quality While Reducing Costs

Nephrologist Arif Asif, MD, said health care providers should be aware of the BIG 7—a phrase he coined to describe the seven chronic diseases (hypertension, diabetes, obesity, coronary artery disease, congestive heart failure, chronic kidney disease and cardio pulmonary disease) that have the biggest impact on morbidity and mortality, and, as such, the biggest impact on health costs.

To help address this problem, Dr. Asif, Thomas Ordway Distinguished Professor of Medicine and chief of Nephrology and Hypertension, and Paul Sorum, MD, professor of Medicine and Pediatrics, are directing a two-day conference, “Outpatient Management of the BIG-7 in our Changing Healthcare Environment: Optimizing Care Using ACO’s/Medical Homes and Minimizing Readmissions,” Saturday, March 28, and Sunday, March 29, at the Hilton Garden Inn in Troy. More than 250 physicians, physician assistants, nurse practitioners and other providers are expected to attend.

According to Dr. Asif, understanding these diseases is critical in today’s health care climate. “Recent health care reforms focus on optimizing medical care and reducing costs, yet payment reorganization strategies are converging on value and quality,” he said. “The BIG 7 occupy a major portion of health care in the United States. This conference will equip health care providers with key management concepts that will result in improvement of care, as well as cost reduction.”

The conference is sponsored by the Department of Medicine, the Division of Nephrology and Hypertension, and the Office of Continuing Medical Education, in collaboration with the New York Chapter of the American College of Physicians. Evelisse Verrico, MD, Jennifer Lindstrom, MD, John Rosenberger, MD, and James Desemone, MD, are co-directors.

To register or for more information, please visit: www.amc.edu/Big_7_Conference.
Patients Serve as Mentors to Physicians-in-Training

SERVICE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES REMIND STUDENTS WHY THEY CHOSE MEDICINE

During her first year at Albany Medical College, Ruby Monichan found herself sitting in the outpatient clinic at New York Oncology Hematology—an unexpected stop in her journey to earn her medical degree, but one she said will shape her approach to her career for many years to come.

Between classes and studying, Monichan was serving as a patient navigator through a service learning program sponsored by the College that pairs medical students with breast and lung cancer patients. Her job was to help her patient navigate a complex health care system while dealing with diagnoses that were often frightening.

Monichan attended her patient’s chemotherapy appointments and other check-ups, where sometimes she helped answer questions about diet and nutrition. Other times she and her assigned patient talked about “life outside of cancer.”

“I was able to provide an information resource other than Google and offer the support of someone objective who can help the patient make informed decisions,” said Monichan.

Students receive training in relaying information that patients need to overcome obstacles to proper screening, diagnosis and treatment of cancer, including how to help patients with a lack of financial resources, transportation or child care issues, or communication and language barriers. One session involves role playing, where students learn to deal with difficult situations and patients’ emotions.

Whatever their role, students who have experienced direct patient contact through service learning encounters agree that what they learn is invaluable and will change the way they practice medicine.

“Sometimes it’s easy in your first two years of medical school, when you’re busy with textbooks, anatomy, studying and exams, to lose sight of why you wanted to become a physician in the first place,” Monichan said.

“Service learning helps keep you in check,” she said. “My own experience taught me empathy. Your patient may not want to burden you with one more question, but if you spend just one more minute to answer them, it has a positive impact on that patient’s care.”

COMMUNITY MATTERS … AT ALBANY MED

Spotlight On The Satellites

Albany Med now boasts 30 locations outside of the main New Scotland Avenue corridor, with more set to open in Clifton Park and Colonie in the upcoming months. These specialty centers and EnUrgent Care locations aim to bring Albany Med’s expert health care providers closer to where patients live.

Albany Med Delmar, located at 250 Delaware Avenue, Suite 202, has been meeting the needs of patients who live south of Albany for more than two years. Practitioners seeing patients in Delmar include specialists in cardiology, colorectal surgery, endocrinology, gastroenterology, general surgery, hepatobiliary surgery, neurology, neurosurgery, obstetrics and gynecology, pediatric surgery and urology. To learn more or to schedule an appointment, please call (518) 264-0701 or visit www.amc.edu/delmar_physicians.