

DIVISION OF

HEMATOLOGY + CELLULAR THERAPY

KOEN VAN BESIEN, MD, PHD | DIVISION CHIEF

2023 was a year of restructuring, recruitment and growth for the Division of Hematology and Cell Therapy Program. Under new leadership, the Division was reorganized with an emphasis on disease specific research and care.

The Leukemia Program (Ben Tomlinson, MD) excels in the care of older adults with MDS and Acute Leukemia. We provide access to numerous novel drugs and drug combinations that are more efficacious and better tolerated. Assessment and mitigation of frailty and social barriers allows us to offer curative donor transplants to many older patients.

The Lymphoma and Chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL) program (Changchun Deng, MD, PhD, Director) was marked by rapid growth of research protocols, now offering innovative options in both frontline as well as relapse settings. As the treatment landscape in lymphoma is increasingly dominated by CAR T-cell therapy, we are a leader in this field. Our in-house rapid CAR T-cell program has accrued 5 patients with exciting preliminary results. Our first patient, an older man with aggressive mantle cell lymphoma has achieved a durable remission with minimal side effects.

The Myeloma program has been completely reorganized over the past year. New bispecific antibody treatments (BITEs) and CAR-T's are revolutionizing treatment and prognosis and we are poised to be at the forefront. We recently opened a trial for B cell-activating factor (BAFF) CAR T-cell. This novel targeted therapy, developed by UH scientists, provides yet another treatment option for our patients.

The care of patients with sickle cell disease (Sam Anim, MD, Director) is entering a new era. Several new medications have been approved to alleviate sickle cell symptoms. But even more exciting is the recent approval of gene therapy for patients with sickle cell disease – finally a curative therapy with wide implementation. UH Rainbow and Seidman Cancer Center are the major referral center for sickle cell care in Cleveland and are one of a few centers in Ohio to offer both gene therapy and allogeneic transplant for patients with advanced sickle cell disease.

The study of bleeding and clotting disorders (Lalitha Nayak, MD Director) has a long tradition of excellence at UH. We continue to build on this excellence with several faculty members overseeing research labs and a budding clinical research program.

The Cell Therapy program (Koen van Besien, MD, PhD) is enmeshed with each of the disease programs and offers advanced therapeutic including stem cell transplant, CAR T-cell and gene therapy. The program is driven by innovation and quality. It was fully reaccredited by the Foundation for Accreditation of Cell Therapy and outcomes as reported by the National Marrow Donor Program are excellent. Innovation is driven by our close integration with the Wesley Center for Immunotherapy and the National Center for Regenerative Medicine.

Finally, the combined Hematology/Oncology Fellowship under the direction of Dr. Benjamin Tomlinson, continues to do very well. Five new fellows were recruited, two of them are Harrington scholars, and we were able to recruit our highest ranked applicants.



DIVISION OF

SOLID TUMOR ONCOLOGY

JORGE GARCIA, MD, FACP | DIVISION CHIEF

What are our strengths; what are the possibilities; what are our dreams and aspirations; what are the meaningful outcomes? These are the vital questions our division must embrace as we embark on a new year. Defining our individual and collective destiny demands dedication and resilience and cannot solely rely on external influences. It is essential to acknowledge that healthcare in our country faces unprecedented uncertainty and complexity. These challenges compel our faculty to embrace the diversity within our teams and recognize the significance of team effectiveness and clinical/academic productivity.

In 2023, our division demonstrated remarkable clinical and academic productivity, and our new faculty members are finding their paths in their respective fields. Undoubtedly, this journey differs for each of us, emphasizing the importance of supporting and mentoring those who need it most. As we embrace these differences, our division has initiated programmatic changes to address our strengths and aspirations. Our ultimate goal is to have every person who cares for one of our patients fully engaged in our mission to deliver the most sophisticated, innovative, compassionate, and state-of-the-art cancer care to every patient that enters our institution. We must connect the dots between individual values and purpose and our institutional values, purpose, and vision.

Three clinical programs of significant importance for our division include our oncology supportive and palliative program, our cancer patient survivorship program, and the integrative oncology program.

These programs are integral components of our comprehensive approach to cancer care, addressing the diverse needs of our patients at different stages of their cancer journey. Several initiatives aimed to expand these services are underway.

Equally important is the development of our young onset gastrointestinal (GI) cancer program. This initiative recognizes the unique challenges and complexities faced by individuals diagnosed with GI cancers at a younger age. Our comprehensive approach, combined with our commitment to innovation, research, and continuous improvement, sets us apart as a center of excellence in the field. By focusing our efforts on this critical patient population, we can make a significant impact on their lives and establish ourselves as leaders in young onset GI cancer care on a national scale.

Moving forward, research expansion will become a top priority. While our accrual to therapeutic trials continues to improve, we recognize the importance of producing smart trial designs and creating disease-specific research portfolios that reflect the population of our catchment area.

As the academic year unfolds, we envision our division becoming a pioneering force in oncology research, setting new standards of excellence and innovation in the field. I cannot be more excited for what this new year will bring and how we can contribute to the life of those who we serve and to the overall strategic vision of our healthcare system.

