

**UT THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE®
MEDICAL CENTER**

CANCER INSTITUTE

2020 Letter from the Director of the Cancer Institute

In every annual report, we take some time to look back on the year we've completed and look forward with determination and vision on what we plan to accomplish. It would be impossible to look back on 2020 and not address the COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented challenges we have faced. As we look forward to 2021 with hope of returning to some version of normalcy, we also know it will take time and perseverance.



John L. Bell, MD, FACS

The [impact of COVID-19 on cancer care in the US](#) has resulted in significant decreases and delays in new cancer diagnosis and treatment. We are proud to say that despite the national trend, the Cancer Institute continued to show increases in many of our service lines, reflecting our determination and resourcefulness in [continuing to care for patients throughout the pandemic](#). In 2020, we faced challenges greater than anything we have had to face before. We had to work quickly to make changes to the way we take care of patients and continuously respond to the ever changing environment of leading healthcare during a global pandemic. The long hours, added expectations, and mounting stress of this work along with caring for ourselves as well as our own families has been daunting. Our team in the Cancer Institute has rose to the occasion every step of the way. Not only have they continued to show up for our patients, but they've done so with a smile on their face and a willingness to go the extra mile to keep our patients, their families, and each other safe.

In the early days of the pandemic, the UT Medical Center Cancer Institute had to quickly pivot and provide a safe alternative to in-person patient visits, which we achieved through [telehealth](#). This allowed our providers a way to continue seeing their patients through both phone and video visits, where possible and appropriate. We also had to institute changes to our visitation policy, add COVID-19 screening stations at all entrances to the hospital and outpatient areas, and implement [protocols from ASCO](#) to COVID test all new chemotherapy patients. We recognize that this asked a lot of our patients and their families. We appreciate their compliance, patience, and willingness to follow these new guidelines and expectations.

While the pandemic consumed much of our energy, we were also able to accomplish much. First, we were able to accept and fund the first round of research grants from our [Cancer Research Endowment \(CRE\)](#). The CRE represents the culmination of a five-year-long fundraising campaign that raised \$5.5 million. All funds were raised in the East Tennessee community with over 1,191 donors supporting the endeavor. [You can learn more about our 2020-2021 grant recipients and their amazing work here.](#)

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In January 2020, the medical center commissioned our new mobile mammography unit to continue providing convenient screening mammograms to women throughout the region. The new unit was made possible through several philanthropic gifts and we are forever grateful for the generosity of these donors. Even through service disruptions due to the pandemic in 2020, the new MMU was able to perform over 3,200 screenings across 18 counties, 366 of these were for women who are uninsured. Screenings on the MMU resulted in 25 breast cancer diagnoses.

The University Health System Board of Directors unanimously and enthusiastically endorsed the development of a Bone Marrow Transplant program. This year we took the next step in offering Bone Marrow Transplant and Cellular Therapy programs to East TN by hiring Kelly McCaul, MD, and Raj Renju, MD, to lead our program. UTMC has made a multi-million dollar commitment to put forth the resources of space, budget, and personnel to bring this program to our community. It will offer patients in East TN who need cellular therapy an opportunity to have the best clinical outcomes without having to travel away from the comforts of their own community. The Cellular Therapy program will launch in October 2021 with the opening of our new Oncology and Bone Marrow Transplant unit.

We previously shared with you information on the Tissue Biobank and Precision Medicine Program under the leadership of Lisa Duncan, MD, Chair of the Department of Pathology and her colleagues. This program positions us to do research that translates from the laboratory to the bedside, then back to help develop new and improved therapies. In 2020, the biobank consented over 600 cancer patients and collected over 450 specimens which are now available for research purposes.

While the pandemic delayed, then shifted the way we recruited new physicians, we are happy to say that we met our recruitment goals by hiring the following physicians:

- Sameh Attia, MD, Pulmonary Diseases, University Pulmonary and Critical Care
- Christopher Brett, MD, Radiation Oncology- Coming in fall 2021
- Kelly McCaul, MD, Medical Oncology, Medical Director of the Cellular Therapy Program
- Robert Miller, MD, Medical Director Radiation Oncology- Coming in January 2021
- Renju Raj, MD, Medical Oncology, Cellular Therapy Program
- Ryan Schmocker, MD, Surgical Oncology, University Surgical Oncology
- Laura Spranklin, DO, Medical Oncology, University Cancer Specialists
- Ashish Thakkar, MD, Pulmonary Diseases, University Pulmonary and Critical Care
- Adam Tyson, MD, Hospice and Palliative Care, University Palliative Care

One of the strategic areas of focus for the Cancer Institute impacted by the pandemic was our focus on community education and offering free cancer screening events. It simply was not safe to hold large screening and community education events in 2020. We will bring these opportunities back as soon as it is safe to do so. Unfortunately, [many people missed screenings and annual appointments in 2020](#), so we know

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we must be prepared to respond to the potential variations which will likely be seen in patient volumes in the near future. We are currently planning how we will face these challenges in the future.

One way to do this is by creating more capacity for screenings, which University Breast Center did in January 2021 by opening a satellite location at Northshore Town Center in West Knoxville. The Cancer Institute continues to look strategically at satellite locations that allow us to take specialists and services to outlying areas.

Philanthropy continues to be a critical focus allowing us to be successful. It impacts greatly how we grow and expand our services to the community and offer state-of-the-art treatments and highly skilled physicians to care for the growing number of oncology patients in East TN. In order to continue growing, we have to focus on philanthropy to fill the operational margin gaps.

As I look back at 2020, I couldn't be more proud of the way our team in the Cancer Institute rose to the challenge at hand and never once stepped away from the responsibility we take very seriously. One thing we know: cancer doesn't care about COVID. Even in the midst of a global pandemic, we still have a job to do, and that job is to continue showing up for our patients and making sure they are being offered the highest level of oncology care. We were certainly not immune to the challenges of 2020, seeing many of our own team affected by the virus. As I look to 2021, I know help is on the way through vaccines and improved COVID treatments, and I have hope that we will return to some state of normalcy.

I hope you remain engaged in the activities and initiatives of the Cancer Institute or become interested in supporting our mission to provide those in the community and region with compassionate, comprehensive, and coordinated cancer care.

As always, I remain open to hearing for you. If you have any questions or comments about this report or anything related to the Cancer Institute, please do not hesitate to contact me directly. I would love to share more with you about the services we offer and the great care that happens every day in the Cancer Institute.



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Director, UT Medical Center Cancer Institute

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