A PET SAVED HIS LIFE

Ben playing a Tortorici Guitar

"Get that thumb behind the neck," Ben Tortorici says with a smile as he describes how a guitar should be held. Ben, a master guitar maker and a survivor of two cancers, describes how he discovered a lump in his neck while shaving. It was an aggressive thyroid cancer, the first cancer he was diagnosed with.

From there, a team of Pacific Shores Medical Group doctors worked together to ensure Ben's health. He went through surgery, and was being monitored by Dr. Farjami, who recommended a PET scan.

"The PET scan was ordered to study the progress of the thyroid cancer," says Dr. Tchekmedyian, who originally treated Ben. "But Dr. Cham, who read the results, made sure to not miss anything outside the thyroid area. And remarkably, he focused on a small abnormality he saw in the colon." Because of this serendipitous finding, Dr. Farjami ordered a colonoscopy and found an early colon cancer.

Ben had neglected to have a colonoscopy after age 50. Luckily, at 64, his doctors found his colon cancer at the earliest stage, before it could spread.

"I was getting tired of having so many tests, but Dr. Farjami kept after me and it was his prodding that caused me to get that colonoscopy," Ben says. "I thank him for that."

Dr. Farjami notes that patients with a history of cancer may have a genetic susceptibility for other cancers. "We had the early colon cancer surgically removed, and the prognosis is excellent; no need for chemotherapy!" he says. "We also gave Ben more good news: There were no signs of thyroid cancer on the PET scan."

"It was very scary because you never know what they're going to say," Ben's wife Patricia says about his being diagnosed and treated for two cancers. "It is worrisome, even now. But he's doing very well, and we're extremely thankful for that."

Ben continues to thrive. He loves to play guitar and fly model gliders, of which he has some great ones hanging in his house.

Ben is taking charge of his health. He is exercising and his trainer helps him get in shape. With the inner strength to beat cancer twice and with the help of his doctors and trainer, Ben can now be called a master of survivorship!

Kalust Ucar, MD

BRIDGING THE GAP: FROM ACADEMIC RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

by Kalust Ucar, M.D.

Too often, cancer is a race against time.

Every bit of new information must be brought to our patients as soon as possible. We do our best to achieve this, but one obstacle in our path is that most cancer patients seek treatment at local community cancer practices while much of the new information is concentrated at academic centers. There is a gap – but it is one that local oncologists can bridge.

By becoming clinical investigators, local community oncologists can bring the newest treatments and technologies to patients who will benefit the most from these innovations. By participating in clinical trials and working closely with academic centers, local oncologists can help their patients achieve better survival rates, improve their quality of life, and find cures for their diseases.

Among the first patients I saw when I moved from academia to private practice 12 years ago was a woman with stage IV HER2-positive breast cancer. Herceptin® (trastuzumab) was still in clinical trials at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and wasn't yet commercially available. As a community oncology practice, Pacific Shores Medical Group was participating in these clinical trials.

This partnership between an academic center and our private practice brought the best of both worlds to my patient. She was the first person to receive Herceptin® at Glendale Memorial Hospital, years before it would become available commercially. Our practice helped advance the science of oncology, and we also had very early experience with the new treatment, including its benefits and side effects. UCLA benefited from the data we collected from our patient, who didn't have to travel farther to get her treatment.

We continue to work in conjunction with the UCLA Affiliated Translational Oncology Research Network, the National Cancer Institute, the National Surgical Adjuvant Breast and Bowel Project (NSABP), and the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industry. By collaborating with such a diverse group of academic, government, nonprofit and industry research groups, our practice gives patients access to new, targeted clinical trials for treatments specifically engineered to attack cancer cells at their weakest spots while sparing normal cells and tissues.

With these products we seek to inhibit and reverse cancer growth without the harsh side effects of more traditional treatments. Among these programs are new monoclonal antibodies, molecules that block cancer cell growth pathways, angiogenesis inhibitors, gene products, anti-cancer immune therapies, and a rapidly expanding array of new and promising cancer-fighting options. Most treatments can be delivered conveniently in the comfort of our outpatient facilities located in Los Angeles and Orange counties.

Of particular importance is our membership in the UCLA Affiliated Translational Oncology Research Network, which allows us to offer our patients options that otherwise would not be available locally. We feel privileged to have the opportunity to work with the extraordinary researchers at UCLA.

The whole purpose of clinical research is to turn new scientific discoveries into more effective, safe, and advanced treatments. There is great value in linking community oncology patient care – as we provide at Pacific Shores Medical Group – with cutting-edge academic research. Our oncologists are clinical investigators. They bring the newest treatment options to our patients in the comfort and convenience of our offices. Our access to these resources also adds to the enthusiasm that our doctors, nurses, and staff share for our work – and to the level of care we provide to our patients.