

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

Media Contact: Barbara Bedrick

214-648-3404

barbara.bedrick@utsouthwestern.edu

UT SOUTHWESTERN RESEARCH PROLONGS LIVES OF CHILDREN WITH CANCER

DALLAS – August 27, 2002 – Two months shy of his 6th birthday, Sam Helsley of Fort Worth savors stepping up to bat. Playing T-ball may be a rite of passage for most boys his age, but for Sam, who's had more than his share of opponents, it's a hard-won victory. When he was 23 months old, he was diagnosed with an advanced-stage childhood cancer.

Sam's pediatrician had discovered a grapefruit-sized tumor in the boy's abdomen, which was removed surgically. The neuroblastoma diagnosis – a deadly cancer originating in the sympathetic nervous system – was a blow to his parents.

"When you find your child has a tumor, you want to take care of them and you can't," recalled his mother, Jennefer Helsley. "We turned to doctors at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas who were conducting national pediatric drug trials to treat neuroblastoma with stem-cell transplants."

Dr. Victor Aquino, assistant professor of pediatrics at UT Southwestern, performed the first tandem stem-cell transplant for neuroblastoma in North Texas on Sam.

Sam received two stem-cell transplants back-to-back. Stem cells were harvested from the toddler's bone marrow, and then he was treated with high-dose chemotherapy and radiation therapy to destroy diseased cells. The healthy stem cells were returned to the patient so that they could grow and reseed the marrow with healthy cells. The procedure was repeated, so that Sam's cancer received twice the amount of chemotherapy as one transplant.

"Without transplants, it's incurable," said Aquino, who directs UT Southwestern's pediatric stem-cell transplant program and treats about eight neuroblastoma cases a year. "Even then, two out of three neuroblastoma patients die after transplants because the cancer recurs."

For Sam, the therapy was successful. His cancer is in remission.

Pediatric clinical trials, like the one in which Sam participated, have often been supported with seed, core or supplemental funding by the Children's Cancer Fund, a private Dallas foundation, and other organizations. The Children's Cancer Fund was formed in 1982 by parents of pediatric cancer patients being treated at Children's Medical Center of Dallas by UT Southwestern physicians. It raises funds to support research and training at UT Southwestern,

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as well as clinical service programs at Children's, through events such as Battle of the Real Estate Stars, the Beyond the Rainbow Luncheon and Fashion Show, held each spring, and from individual, corporate and foundation donations.

"For 20 years, the Children's Cancer Fund has helped UT Southwestern garner the critical resources for bringing major clinical studies and other innovative therapies to an ever-growing array of pediatric cancer patients, many like Sam," said Dr. George Buchanan, professor of pediatrics and director of UT Southwestern's pediatric oncology program within the Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Children's Cancer Fund donations, now approaching \$6 million, have served as a constant source of seed money to attract the public and private funds critical to the support of a world-class program, said Buchanan, who holds the Children's Cancer Fund Distinguished Chair in Pediatric Oncology and Hematology. The funds also have helped recruit and train pediatric oncologists and cancer researchers at UT Southwestern.

The Children's Cancer Fund also supports other UT Southwestern cancer-fighting trials ranging from studies of new chemotherapies for pediatric leukemia patients to bone-marrow and blood stem-cell transplants, and an innovative combination chemotherapy/radiation weapon against pediatric brain cancers.

"Our mission is to find the cure, or cures, for all pediatric cancers," said Virginia Cook, 2002 president of the Children's Cancer Fund board. "UT Southwestern's research is producing some exciting and very promising results toward achieving our mission."

Sam starts kindergarten this month, but it won't be until he's almost through elementary school before his doctors will proclaim him cancer-free.

"Neuroblastoma always threatens to return," said Sam's father, Bart Helsley, noting that the treatments have enabled his lively son to lead a fairly normal life.

His mother said, "We felt better about it after one year, but we still live with it every day."

Sam, however, is ready to knock the ball out of the park.

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