

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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UT SOUTHWESTERN ALS CLINIC ONE OF BEST IN NATION

DALLAS — February 24, 1997 — Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, strikes fast and hard. It knocks out individuals' ability to walk or talk or breathe but leaves their minds intact, so patients are fully aware of what they're living through.

The Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) this month officially designated UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas' ALS clinic as the MDA/ALS Center of Dallas. The name identifies the facility as one of the nation's 13 best locations for comprehensive ALS medical care. The clinic was established in 1987, but this latest MDA honor recognizes the substantial increase in patients and expansion of services in recent years. Several major new drug trials are under way at the clinic, reflecting a series of research advances.

Symptoms of the disease, named after the New York Yankee great whose career and life it ended, include the gradual "wasting away" of motor neurons that control muscles in the body. Patients often are confined to a wheelchair within a short time of diagnosis and may eventually be unable to breathe because their chest muscles have stopped functioning. The average life span after diagnosis is three years.

Bill Wolke spent two decades as a professional dancer, performing with Martha Graham and other prestigious troupes in New York City. He finally left dance — because he "had to eat" — moved to Dallas and began working in computer graphics. He first suspected something might be wrong when he started dropping things frequently and making errors while working on the computer keyboard.

The 58-year-old Wolke is still going strong four years after being diagnosed with ALS although the muscles in his arms and legs have weakened. The leg muscles he developed while dancing have sustained him through ALS, Wolke believes, allowing him to continue to be mobile. On the emotional front, he gets a great deal of comfort from clinic staffers and

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fellow ALS patients.

"Whatever you're having a problem with, they can get you the help," he said.

"They're very caring." Wolke also does his part for the team effort, maintaining a library of ALS publications for use by patients and their families.

Dr. Wilson Bryan, assistant professor of neurology, and Dr. Richard Barohn, associate professor of neurology, lead the clinic's team of ALS specialists, who include a physical therapist, respiratory therapist, social worker, psychologist and nurses. Patients usually are evaluated by several members of the staff at each appointment.

Wolke, a free spirit who is known as "Wild Bill" around the clinic, contends that humor plays a vital role in maintaining the positive atmosphere in the clinic. Vicki Cearley, who has been going to the center for two years, agrees.

"We sometimes feel like sisters and brothers to each other, and we talk very seriously. But we also joke around," she said. "A sense of humor can make all the difference for the patients as well as their family members."

The families need that support, says David Moore, who lost his wife, Carol Ann, to ALS last year. Childhood sweethearts, Moore and his wife had been out of touch for years when they just happened to sit beside each other in a movie theater. They began dating again and married. Less than a year later, Carol Ann was diagnosed with ALS.

"I realize now that I had loved her all my life," Moore said. "The last couple of years have been the most difficult time in my life, but the people at the clinic did all they could to get us through it. I'm amazed they can deal with it day after day."

When patients are referred to UT Southwestern, they must undergo a series of tests related to strength, coordination and breathing. Cearley, who now needs assistance walking and is no longer working, said she was a bit intimidated on her first visit to the clinic as she was examined by one specialist after another. She now appreciates the range of experience offered at the clinic and looks forward to her monthly visits.

Bryan sees about 15 patients a week and is beginning to look more optimistically toward the future. The first drug shown to successfully combat ALS symptoms, increasing

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some patients' lives by three months, was approved by the Food and Drug Administration last year, and several other medications also are being tested at UT Southwestern and other centers around the country. Researchers still do not understand the cause of ALS, which strikes one in every 100,000 people, but they are beginning to find ways to curb its destructive course.

"While we have always offered comfort and support to our patients, we are finally able to offer a little hope as well," Bryan said.

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