

# CENTER TIMES

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CAMPUS EDITION

## UT Southwestern pauses campus reopening plan as COVID-19 cases rise



Dr. Genevieve Konopka, Associate Professor of Neuroscience, studies brain samples in her lab.

By Carol Marie Cropper

While keeping a vigilant eye on the number of new COVID-19 cases, UT Southwestern began a phased reopening in May – resuming nonemergency procedures that were suspended due to COVID-19, restarting near-shuttered research labs, and finding ways to train the next generation of health care providers and scientists during a pandemic.

By July, patient counts at William P. Clements Jr. University Hospital had returned to about 90 percent, approximately 2,500 employees had come back to work on campus, and many medical students had

resumed clinical rotations.

But as COVID-19 cases began rising again in North Texas in mid-June, plans for additional steps toward pre-COVID normalcy were put on hold. In a July 1 briefing, UT Southwestern President Dr. Daniel K. Podolsky told the campus community the number of COVID-19 cases was increasing in Dallas and across the state, with patients under age 50 showing up in growing numbers.

While UT Southwestern remained in a good position to accommodate COVID-19 patients, “it’s clear that we have a greater challenge today than we had just a few weeks ago,” Dr. Podolsky said.

To prepare for potential increases in COVID-19 patient counts, some types of

clinical services, such as geriatrics, were transferred from Clements University Hospital to Zale Lipshy Pavilion – William P. Clements Jr. University Hospital, Dr. Podolsky said. In addition, more procedures were being performed at the new UT Southwestern Medical Center at Frisco, with plans for UT Southwestern to use space if needed at the Texas Health Dallas campus, he said.

To reduce the curve of rising COVID cases seen in June, it will be crucial for members of the campus community to wear protective masks, use good hand hygiene, and practice social distancing, Dr. Podolsky said. While UTSW had seen only six cases of

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## Three approved drugs can curb COVID-19 virus replication

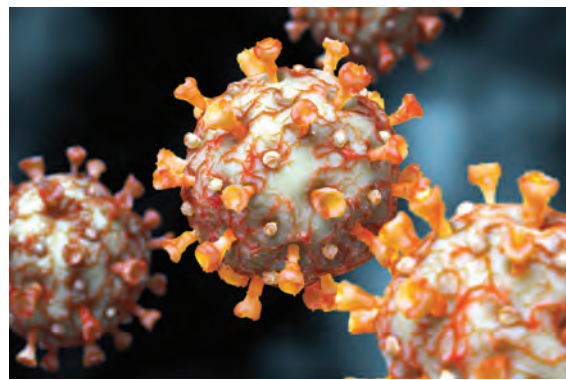
By Christen Brownlee

Three drugs already approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) or other international agencies can block the production of the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 in human cells, according to computational and pharmaceutical studies performed by UT Southwestern scientists.

These findings, published on a preprint server known as ChemRxiv on May 14 prior to peer review, build on other recent research by the same team to quickly find promising agents against this often serious respiratory condition.

COVID-19, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, has now infected more than 4 million people and killed more than 300,000 worldwide since it emerged in December 2019. Scientists around the globe have focused their efforts on discovering potential vaccines and therapeutics to prevent and treat this disease. For example, recent studies have suggested that the antiviral drug remdesivir shows some promise at reducing disease severity in COVID-19 patients. However, thus far, researchers have found no treatment or prophylaxis with clear evidence of clinical benefit across large populations.

Developing new pharmaceuticals could take months, even



SARS-CoV-2 virus

with rapid approval, according to study leaders Dr. Hesham Sadek, Professor of Internal Medicine, Molecular Biology, and Biophysics; Dr. John Schoggins, Associate Professor of Microbiology; and Dr. Mahmoud Ahmed, Instructor of Internal Medicine. Thus, the UTSW researchers are testing drugs that are already approved by the FDA or other international agencies to see if they can attack this virus.

Recently, Dr. Sadek and his colleagues published a study in the same preprint server that used computer modeling to screen thousands of FDA-approved drugs for their ability to fit into the binding pocket of SARS-CoV-2’s main protease, an enzyme that the virus uses to chop up long strands of viral proteins.

“Each piece has individual functions that are really impor-

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## Blue Angels’ flyover supports our heroes



The Navy’s Blue Angels jets flew over William P. Clements Jr. University Hospital and other North Texas hospitals on May 6 to support COVID-19 health care workers and first responders as part of a nationwide effort.

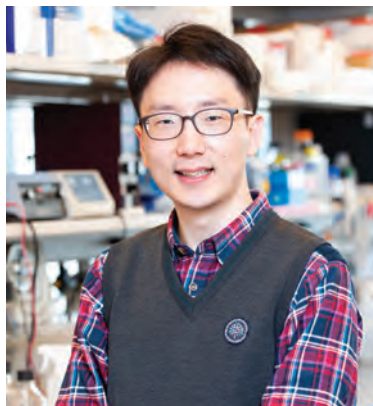
## Cancer biologist wins Nominata Award

By Nyshicka Jordan

Cancer biologist Dr. Jin Suk Park first became fascinated with cells in high school when his biology teacher encouraged his class to pursue independent study.

“Back then, I became quite interested in how the extracellular matrix – a noncellular structure that regulates almost all cellular functions – can interact with cancer cells to facilitate biological functions,” said Dr. Park. “I published a study about the spatial interaction between collagen and guard cells in *Canadian Young Scientist Journal*. It actually gave me a taste of what it means to be a scientist.”

His passion for understanding cells and their connection to cancer would eventually lead him to UT Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences in 2013, where he focused his studies on the relationship between cell mechanics



Dr. Jin Suk Park

– how cells move, interact, sense, and respond to mechanical forces – and cell metabolism in non-small cell lung cancer. In recognition of his work, Dr. Park is the recipient of the 2020 Nominata Award,

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## UTSW expands virtual care during pandemic

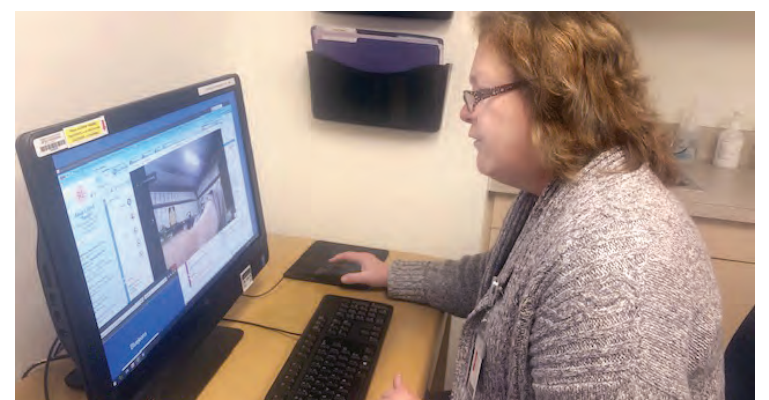
By Courtney Borchert

A physician huddled close to his desktop monitor, waiting for the next patient to appear on the computer screen. As with any new technology, there is a learning curve for both patient and provider that may include a spotty virtual connection or fine-tuning speaker volume or camera settings.

“Good afternoon,” Dr. Jaime Almandoz, Medical Director of UT Southwestern’s Weight Wellness Program and Assistant Professor of Internal Medicine, said to his patient checking in for a follow-up visit. “How are you doing today?”

“Ah, there you are,” the patient replied, explaining she had some difficulty initially connecting. “I’m good. Nice to see you, even though virtually.”

As the telehealth visit proceeded, the initial awkwardness of talking by video faded away. Soon, the conversation flowed easily as the patient



Dr. Sharon Nations in Neurology and Neurotherapeutics speaks with a patient during a telehealth visit.

talked about her progress in the weight loss program or current challenges. Welcome to medicine in the virtual age, prompted into overdrive by COVID-19.

The coronavirus pandemic has forced health care providers to rethink how they deliver services to patients. Clinics have undergone rapid technological change in a matter of weeks

to fulfill patient care needs as non-urgent hospital and clinic visits were suspended to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

At UT Southwestern, virtual care is filling the gap for many during this public health emergency and protecting those who are most vulner-

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Therapy dogs, singers lift spirits of health care workers treating COVID-19 patients.

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## FOCUS: COVID-19 CRISIS

## Giving spirit: Pandemic brings out generosity of the Dallas community

By Courtney Borchert

Like many others, 15-year-old Valerie Xu's world was quickly consumed by the tidal wave of news related to COVID-19. But when she learned about a nationwide shortage of protective gear for health care workers, it was like a call to action.

"We have a family friend who is an emergency room doctor in Florida," she said. "He has needed to reuse masks to conserve supplies. Hearing about his experience helped me understand the dedication and sacrifices that health care workers are making now."

While students across Dallas County hunkered down in their homes, Valerie, a Greenhill School freshman, was leading a crowdfunding campaign and making late night phone calls to manufacturers in China to find equipment she could get to Dallas. With help from her mother, she secured a shipment of masks for UT Southwestern.

"This pandemic made me realize I should be giving back to UT Southwestern the same way they gave me proper treatment when I was sick," Valerie said.

When she was in the third grade, UTSW doctors cared for Valerie when she had a high-grade fever. The memory of medical workers helping her scared family inspired her to give back to local front-line heroes battling COVID-19.

Valerie is just one of many community members and businesses across North Texas that have banded together to put needed supplies in the hands of health care workers. Valerie's "Masks Matter" campaign raised \$7,500, including money contributed online, matching funds from a local business, and a personal donation of more than \$1,000 from her savings. With the money, she was able to deliver 10,000 surgical masks and 1,200 FFP2 respirator masks on April 24.

On June 5, thanks to more contributions, she was able to make a second donation of 4,000



Valerie Xu, 15, hauls in boxes of masks she collected for UT Southwestern health care workers as the organizer of a donation drive.

surgical masks and 1,400 FFP2 respirator masks to UT Southwestern.

Personal protective equipment (PPE) like face shields and N95 masks have remained in high demand at hospitals during the pandemic. The public has graciously stepped in to boost medical supply stockpiles at UT Southwestern, with more than 225,000 pieces of PPE donated as of May 1.

"Our community has stepped up in profound ways and with remarkable generosity," said Dr. John Warner, Executive Vice President for Health System Affairs.

Philanthropic actions made by local businesses, restaurants, dental offices, churches, and countless individuals shine bright in the midst of a pandemic.

Donors are aiding UTSW health care workers in a variety of ways, from Toyota Motor North

America, Southern Methodist University, and Parish Episcopal School in Dallas producing hundreds of 3D-printed face shields to Mary Kay donating 10,000 units of hand sanitizer.

"Every donation, no matter what size, is like gold to UTSW," said Jamie Engle, Supply Chain Management Administrative Coordinator.

Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban and basketball players Luka Doncic and Dwight Powell teamed up with the Dallas Mavericks Foundation to donate \$500,000 to UT Southwestern and Parkland Memorial Hospital to support the child care needs of health care workers.

To help feed our health care heroes, thousands of individually packaged meals have been donated. For example, the culinary team at Savor in Klyde Warren Park prepared 100 lunch meals on March 31 as a belated National Doctors' Day

gift to the health care staff at William P. Clements Jr. University Hospital.

"The work hospital workers are doing is of vital importance," said Luke Rogers, Savor's Executive Chef. "As people in hospitality, we want to serve those who are serving others."

UTSW staff members overseeing the intake of donations said the outpouring of support has shown what communities are capable of accomplishing when people unite behind a common goal.

"In my role, sometimes you don't get to see or touch UTSW's mission as hands-on as we are doing right now," Ms. Engle said. "To know these donations are so needed and that we're being able to help our medical professionals is the best feeling in the world. I will forever remember this moment as one of the positive things about this whole thing."

An online donation form is available for community members wishing to make a financial or in-kind contribution to support our front-line care providers, patient care, and COVID-19 research efforts.

The Office of Development and Alumni Relations coordinates all donations of meals and medical supplies and can be reached by email at [giving@utsouthwestern.edu](mailto:giving@utsouthwestern.edu) or by phone at 214-648-8988. Drop-offs of donated items can be made by appointment weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

*Dr. Warner holds the Jim and Norma Smith Distinguished Chair for Interventional Cardiology and the Nancy and Jeremy Halbreich, Susan and Theodore Strauss Professorship in Cardiology.*

**More online:** Read the full story on *Center Times Plus* at [utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus](https://utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus).

## Connecting thousands of employees to work remotely

By Lori Sundeen Soderbergh

The directive from leadership in mid-March was clear.

More than 7,000 UT Southwestern employees would need to begin working from home in a matter of days as the campus and the community responded to the coronavirus pandemic. Information Resources quickly needed to ensure that the employees could make the move and stay connected, even though many had never worked remotely before.

Moving that many people off campus from a variety of roles in research, education, and administrative departments presented multiple challenges. Each worker would need the right equipment to do their job at home as well as training on new software tools. Behind the scenes, network capacity would have to be increased to provide access to UT Southwestern systems for everyone who needed it.

"If people had asked two months ago if it was possible to send thousands of people to work remotely in the matter of days, we would have said that you must first secure the approval, the budget, the governance, and so on," said Heather Mishra, Associate Vice President of Academic and Administrative Information Resources. "Instead, we were told to just get it done. And we did."

Accomplishing the feat required



Heather Mishra



Dr. Thomas Spencer

many IR employees to put in 16- to 20-hour workdays, she said. Some normal procedural requirements were relaxed to speed the transition.

Before employees received instructions to work from home and shelter-in-place orders were activated in Dallas, the Business Affairs and IR teams conducted a survey to evaluate what support would be needed. They found that about 1,400 employees were not equipped to work remotely – and others were only partially equipped. Capacity for thousands of additional network licenses were needed, and there was a huge learning curve ahead for nearly everyone.

Almost immediately, employees began calling with questions. On a normal day, the help desk handles 400-500 calls. On Tuesday, March 19, call volume spiked to 1,900 calls.

"Our help desk has been staffed to support a local population on campus during normal working hours. Now, people are working in home environments and have more flexible work-



IR employee Vincent Rivera hands a laptop to HIPAA Officer Abby Jackson to enable her to work remotely.

days – in some cases 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.," said Dr. Thomas Spencer, Assistant Vice President of Academic and Administrative Information Resources.

Ms. Mishra and Dr. Spencer also began leading twice-daily webinars viewed by hundreds of employees, supporting a panel of subject matter experts. Common questions were compiled into informational tip sheets, then posted online along with detailed information on how to get set up, work remotely, and be successful in a remote work environment.

**Reboot and Elevate**

For the past two years, Business Affairs and IR have been updating UT Southwestern's business processes through Project Reboot and Elevate. Much of that work had been completed, laying a foundation to meet the University's business and academic technology needs during the COVID-19 crisis.

"I've spent the last year advocating for UTSW to use these new tools, Office 365 and Microsoft Teams, and now it's happening at warp speed," said Billy Stevenson III, a trainer with Dr. Spencer's team who has been with UTSW for more than two years.

In the past month, he has trained

more than 2,800 employees in a virtual platform and helped move two conferences with hundreds of invitees to an online environment using tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams so they could take place as planned in late April and early May. Using existing tools saves both time and money.

As many employees have discovered, secure access to the UTSW virtual private network (VPN) is essential to connecting with many aspects of UT Southwestern. This was another daunting challenge for the IR team.

During March, UT Southwestern added thousands of VPN licenses. Led by the IR Systems and Operations Group, the push bolstered the infrastructure backbone of the UT Southwestern network.

**Drive-up computer facility**

In addition to improving connectivity and training staff in video conferencing, access to equipment has been the main challenge. There are two primary types of equipment – desktop

computers and laptops. Finding the first proved easier than the second.

"It's been really challenging," said Adolfo Ortuzar, Director of Operations in Academic and Administrative Information Resources. "Supply chains are stretched very thin, and we look for equipment everywhere we can find it."

The UTSW team came up with a menu of options to meet demand. About 400 surplus computers from a variety of campus locations were retooled and sent home with staff. Some workers, with manager approval, loaded up their desktop computers and transferred them to a home office. Others offered to use their home computer. Laptops became such a hot commodity that some people gave up their UTSW laptop, using their personal laptop or desktop instead so another employee could have one.

To quickly get equipment to workers who needed it, a new drive-up facility was set up in a warehouse south of campus and is still meeting needs.

Some of the changes that have been implemented are so appreciated that they could remain in use even after the pandemic ends.

"Through this we have created greater partnerships to solve the problems at hand. That's a piece of this change that I'd like to keep," Ms. Mishra said. "We are innovative and partner with businesses to help drive the missions of the institution forward."

After IR had most people set up for telework, the team's next focus was to help employees work more efficiently.

"Knowing that my work in IR helps our health care workers to help patients is the joy of my job," said Mr. Stevenson. "Delivering the future of medicine and the future of business and education – that day is here. We are delivering that future today."

**More online:** Read the full story on *Center Times Plus* at [utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus](https://utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus).

## CENTERTIMES

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FOCUS: COVID-19 CRISIS

# Recovered COVID-19 patients donate plasma to give back

By Patrick Wascovich

Brandon Barton had barely started unpacking from the trip of a lifetime when he went into a precipitous downward spiral. What the worship arts pastor at Lake Church in Arlington initially self-diagnosed as being overly tired from a long flight home on March 13 soon turned into a 102.8 degree temperature and a trip to the emergency room.

Testing at Texas Health Arlington Memorial confirmed that he was positive for COVID-19. Mr. Barton self-quarantined at his home for the next 15 days while recovering.

When he recovered, Mr. Barton immediately signed up for consideration as a potential plasma donor. People who have recovered from COVID-19 have built up levels of antibodies to defend the body against the SARS-CoV-2 virus. On April 13, after tests on him came back negative for active COVID-19, Mr. Barton became one of the first convalescent plasma donors in North Texas.

"My wife first brought it to my attention. She saw an online story about a family in Midlothian asking someone, anyone to give their antibodies to help the father. Allison researched and found that UT Southwestern and the Red Cross were recruiting plasma donations to Carter BloodCare to help those in need," he said.

Plasma is the clear, straw-colored liquid portion of blood that remains after red blood cells, white blood cells, platelets, and other cellular components are removed, said Dr. Ravindra Sarode, Professor of Pathology and Internal Medicine at UTSW and Medical Director of Clinical Laboratory Services. Plasma carries out a variety of functions in the body, including aiding clotting, fighting diseases, and performing other critical functions.

Clinicians nationwide are testing



After recovering from COVID-19, Brandon Barton became one of the first convalescent plasma donors in North Texas. Mr. Barton and his wife, Allison, with their children – Avaree, 10, Brandt, 5, and Felicity, 7 – and Beethoven the dog.



Dr. Sarode



Dr. De Simone

whether the century-old treatment – known as convalescent serum therapy – is effective against SARS-CoV-2. Those with serious or immediately life-threatening COVID-19 infections can elect to receive antibody-rich plasma taken from recovered patients through the Food and Drug Administration's emergency Investigational New Drug Application (eIND). Hospitalized patients receive one to two units of plasma – typically 200-250 milliliters per unit – that is compatible with their blood type.

UT Southwestern played a lead

role in establishing a plasma donation process in North Texas after the FDA issued guidance on March 28 on investigational use of convalescent plasma, said Dr. Nicole De Simone, an Assistant Professor of Pathology. With the support of University administration, the UT Southwestern COVID-19 Plasma Program was created with a website providing information for potential donors, including an online eligibility questionnaire.

To be a convalescent plasma donor, patients must have received a lab-confirmed positive test for the coronavirus or a positive test for COVID-19 antibodies after recovery and be symptom-free for at least 28 days. If a person who tested positive in either case has a second test that comes back negative, that person can donate after being symptom-free for 14 days.

More than 200 donors, including Mr. Barton, had been screened at UTSW by late April and met initial eligibility



Brandon Barton, worship arts pastor at Arlington's Lake Church, put his faith-based tattoo into practice on April 13 with the "uncommon" act of donating plasma at Carter BloodCare.

criteria, and about 150 units of convalescent plasma had been collected at Carter BloodCare for patients in need in Dallas-Fort Worth and throughout Texas. By early May, North Texas had become one of the leading plasma donation sites in the country, Dr. De Simone said, and UT Southwestern began referring potential donors to Carter BloodCare for screening.

Convalescent plasma has proved effective in past pandemics. It successfully reduced mortality rates of the Spanish influenza outbreak in 1918 and hemorrhagic fever in 1979, though it proved far less effective in treating the Ebola virus in 2014.

At UTSW, a multidisciplinary team including infectious disease, pulmonary critical care, and transfusion medicine physicians has developed criteria to identify potential patient recipients for the plasma, explained Dr. De Simone. As of May 6, four patients at William P. Clements Jr. University Hospital and 10 at Parkland Memorial Hospital have received compassionate-use transfusions from UTSW clinicians. Results have been mixed, with some patients showing improvement and

others not.

Mr. Barton said he had never even donated blood before, but his decision to donate plasma was not hard.

"God put me in this position to do whatever I can for another. Of all the decisions I've had to make in my life, this was the easiest," he said.

Mr. Barton said the initial 15-day stay in his master bedroom was tough. Equally frustrating was the realization that all three of their young kids – Avaree, 10, Felicity, 7, and Brandt, 5 – came down with the flu at the same time, and that their mother, who is immunocompromised with ulcerative colitis, had to fend for herself while caring for the family.

Mr. Barton insists he came out of that single-room existence a better man.

"I think God utilized my time in self-quarantine to calm my heart and speak to me," he said. "I'm extroverted by nature, and it was very hard to stay still and separate from my family and others. But I came out of isolation determined to do something to help others through their challenging times."

Now, every day is cherished and shared.

"Lives are being changed by the small acts of others during this time," Mr. Barton said. "We now walk as a family each night – something we've never done before – just to be together and to see people outside and check on how they are doing. The past eight weeks has been a blessing and I've already said I'm ready to donate plasma again when I'm able."

Dr. Sarode holds the John H. Childers, M.D. Professorship in Pathology.

**More online:** Read the full story on *Center Times Plus* at [utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus](https://utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus).

# Early results promising for patients enrolled in COVID-19 clinical trials

By Patrick Wascovich

UT Southwestern is participating in some of the country's most promising clinical trials with medical centers nationwide to determine whether existing drugs can effectively treat COVID-19.

Patients at William P. Clements Jr. University Hospital and Parkland Memorial Hospital with COVID-19 have been enrolled in two trials testing different strategies for using remdesivir, an antiviral developed during the Ebola outbreak, and a third trial testing sarilumab, a monoclonal antibody originally developed for rheumatoid arthritis.

By the end of April, early results of a National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) trial with remdesivir showed a significant positive effect in treating the virus, said Dr.



Dr. Jain

Mamta Jain, Professor of Internal Medicine, who is leading the investigations for the University. The NIAID study, which involved more than 1,000 patients, compared remdesivir treatment alongside standard of care with a placebo. The experimental drug

helped hospitalized patients at UTSW and elsewhere recover more quickly versus supportive standard care – 11 days on aggregate average compared with 15 – suggesting the drug could become the first effective treatment. On May 1, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorized emergency use of the drug for COVID-19 patients.

UTSW President Dr. Daniel K. Podolsky said the COVID-19 clinical trials position the institution to advance knowledge of the disease and learn from our patients.

"It's remarkable that nearly 50 percent of our patients at Clements University Hospital who



Two clinical trials studied if the existing antiviral drug remdesivir can treat COVID-19, and a third trial is researching sarilumab, a cytokine inhibitor.

are COVID-19 positive have actually enrolled in one of the clinical trials of agents that hope to be effective in treating the disease," Dr. Podolsky told the campus community during an April 22 briefing. "This reflects a tremendous engagement of our patients and support by all of our staff to be part of generating the knowledge, which hopefully gets us to a point where we do have proven, effective, and safe treatments for COVID-19."

The clinical trials were set up to test as-yet scientifically unproven drugs that show promise on three fronts – inhibiting the virus's fusion and entry abilities; disrupting replication of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19; and tamping down and regulating the body's immune response.

Two of the COVID-19 clinical trials involved remdesivir. Both investigations were sponsored by the antiviral drug's manufacturer, Gilead Sciences, and each involved networks of 100 medical centers. Both were ended when interim analysis demonstrated patient benefit in the interventional groups.

As a drug class, antivirals work to stop targeted viruses from making copies of themselves. Remdesivir, a drug given intravenously, was cleared by the FDA in March for "compassionate use" in COVID-19 cases. As a broad-spectrum antiviral, it is believed to work against multiple viruses.

The first COVID-19 remdesivir trial – which enrolled 47 UTSW-served patients in April – involved severe to critically ill patients who had viral pneumonia, required oxygen or mechanical ventilation, and still had functioning kidneys. Once enrolled, all hospitalized trial participants were given remdesivir at 200 mg on the first day, then 100 mg daily for up to 10 days if needed. If they got better and were released, they stopped taking the medication.

The second remdesivir trial – which enrolled 18 UTSW-served patients – involved patients with moderate symptoms who had viral pneumonia, good kidney function, and did not require additional oxygen. Trial participants were given a 200 mg dose of remdesivir on Day 1 and then, depending on which randomized cadre they were

in, received 100 mg doses for five consecutive days, 10 consecutive days, or normal standard of care without dosage. They stopped taking the medication if they improved and were discharged home.

The third trial is for sarilumab, an inhibitor of interleukin-6, a cytokine released from the body to coordinate our immune system's response to infection. This ongoing trial, sponsored by the drugmaker Regeneron Pharmaceuticals and involving 50 U.S. institutions, is evaluating whether the drug allows the body to heal from COVID-19 by putting the brakes on the body's immune response.

Patients were offered participation based on specific criteria and on what the treating physician thought was the best mechanism to target at the time for the specific patient.

For every five patients enrolled in the randomized sarilumab study, two receive 400 mg doses, two are dosed at 200 mg, and one is in a control group that receives a placebo. The drug is infused at Days 1 and 2, then weekly for up to six doses as long as the patient requires oxygen and as long as there is no sign of infection, low white blood count, or significant liver function abnormality.

"A clinical trial with an appropriate control group can show if the drug is more effective than no treatment," Dr. Jain said. "Many people, even those with COVID-19, improve without treatment. Giving treatment that may have toxicities is risky and we are working to show if there is a clear benefit."

Dr. Podolsky holds the Philip O'Bryan Montgomery, Jr., M.D. Distinguished Presidential Chair in Academic Administration, and the Doris and Bryan Wildenthal Distinguished Chair in Medical Science.

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# UTSW caregivers committed to correct racial inequities in health care

By Nyschicka Jordan

For several days, restlessness overwhelmed UT Southwestern medical student Louise Atadja. Outside of the normal stresses of student life, she was anxious as protests broke out in dozens of cities across the nation, including Dallas, following the police-involved killing of George Floyd on May 25.

Ms. Atadja said she had been frustrated at her inability to participate in demonstrations related to Mr. Floyd's death because she was heavily focused on preparing for the crucial Step 1 exam. But on June 5, just a week before her test, she halted her practice exam and rushed to McDermott Plaza to take part in the White Coats for Black Lives rally, joining more than 100 UT Southwestern faculty, trainees, students, and staff who knelt for 8 minutes and 46 seconds in tribute to Mr. Floyd. That's the amount of time a Minneapolis police officer kept his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck before he died.

"During the eight minutes of kneeling, one thing that I was thinking about was the fact that it was Breonna Taylor's birthday," Ms. Atadja said, referring to the black woman shot and killed by Louisville, Kentucky, police in March after they used a battering ram to enter her apartment and execute a no-knock search warrant.

"Focusing both on her death and George Floyd, along with the physical action of kneeling, made me think of the weight many African Americans carry on our backs. As my knee was hurting, it just intensified my frustration and desire for progress," Ms. Atadja said.

The gathering on McDermott Plaza was one of many White Coats for Black Lives events held by health care workers nationwide to reflect on the death of Mr. Floyd and the issue of racial injustice. White Coats for Black Lives is a national



More than 100 members of the UT Southwestern community came together on June 5 for the White Coats for Black Lives rally held at McDermott Plaza. At noon, attendees knelt for 8 minutes and 46 seconds as a tribute to George Floyd, an unarmed black man killed by a Minneapolis police officer in May.

organization that aims to dismantle racism in health care.

The UT Southwestern event, organized by a group of cardiology fellows, was attended by President Dr. Daniel K. Podolsky and the institution's four Executive Vice Presidents: Dr. W. P. Andrew Lee, EVP for Academic Affairs, Provost, and Dean of the Medical School; Dr. John Warner, EVP for Health System Affairs; Dr. Marc Nivet, EVP for Institutional Advancement; and Armin Dantes, EVP for Business Affairs.

Speaking to the attendees, Dr. Nivet recalled the words of Martin Luther King Jr., who said that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

"But it takes a collective effort to bend that arc and we have to work on it together," he said. "I am proud of all of us and all of the people around the country who are leveraging their voices."

Ms. Atadja, who hadn't arrived at the rally planning to speak, said her feet moved faster than her brain as she moved to address the crowd. She spoke about

the isolation she feels because of racism, thanked the crowd for their support, and said she felt hopeful that improvements in racial health inequities could be made.

"Even though I wasn't prepared, I just felt it important that as a black female medical student that I said something," Ms. Atadja said.

Dr. Dale Okorodudu, Assistant Professor of Internal Medicine, works to increase the number of black doctors through his initiative Black Men in White Coats and was invited by organizers to address the rally. He encouraged his colleagues to push for change.

"As physicians, we have a powerful role and a strong voice in society where people listen to us because of our profession. So we should do the right thing to influence other people," he said.

Dr. Shreya Rao, a cardiology fellow who helped organize the rally, acknowledged that kneeling is only a symbolic show of solidarity. But she hopes physicians had some time to reflect about how they can better combat structural racism in health care that leads to disproportional

levels of chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart diseases, and cancer in communities of color.

"That's something I am trying to be more direct about, naming the manifestations of racism within our practice of health care," she said. "We use a lot of euphemisms such as 'disparities' or 'inequity,' but these are really just examples of how racism operates against our patients."

Many health care providers said there is a correlation among unjustified police brutality, systemic racism, and health care inequality that makes raising the issue at the Medical Center relevant.

"The medical community is intimately involved with health and social issues that affect people of color disproportionately," said Dr. Mehari Gebreyohanns, Assistant Professor of Neurology and Neurotherapeutics, who also spoke at the rally. "Advocating for health equity, including mental health that is often indirectly dealt with in the criminal justice system, is the right thing for the long-term solution of having a healthy

community everywhere in the country."

Although rally attendees appreciated that the event allowed the community to come together and share in the somber moment, many said they want to see UTSW do more to eliminate racial bias and discrimination in health care. Dr. Podolsky said the Medical Center is committed to doing so.

On June 10, during the President's weekly briefing to the UTSW community that is typically focused on COVID-19 issues, Dr. Podolsky began by talking about "the need for us at UT Southwestern to confront the scourge of racism and inequality which continues to plague every institution in this country."

"We cannot assume that we at UT Southwestern are immune from that and therefore are obligated to identify where it exists – even in its more insidious forms – and do everything that we can to address it," Dr. Podolsky said.

The Medical Center is working with the President's Council on Diversity and Inclusion to identify areas where the institution can improve and devise active measures to address racial inequality.

Dr. Lee holds the Atticus James Gill, M.D. Chair in Medical Science.

Dr. Podolsky holds the Philip O'Bryan Montgomery, Jr., M.D. Distinguished Presidential Chair in Academic Administration, and the Doris and Bryan Wildenthal Distinguished Chair in Medical Science.

Dr. Warner holds the Jim and Norma Smith Distinguished Chair for Interventional Cardiology and the Nancy and Jeremy Halbreich, Susan and Theodore Strauss Professorship in Cardiology.

**More online:** Read the full story on *Center Times Plus* at [utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus](https://utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus).

## UTSW, Children's Health recognized for Duchenne muscular dystrophy care

By Patrick Wascovich

A joint program of UT Southwestern and Children's Health has been approved as a Certified Duchenne Care Center (CDCC) by Parent Project Muscular Dystrophy (PPMD), the nation's most comprehensive nonprofit organization focused on finding a cure for Duchenne muscular dystrophy.

The UTSW/Children's Health collaboration, which involves UT Southwestern physicians providing care at Children's Health, is the 29th site to be designated as a Certified Duchenne Care Center in the expanding network – and the only one in Texas. The network, created in 2014, recognizes accredited neuromuscular programs that maintain the highest standards in clinical and subspecialty services, rapidly apply new evidence-based knowledge, work collaboratively to minimize clinical or methodological diversity in research outcomes, and comply with established CDC standards in clinical care while delivering comprehensive care to all with Duchenne, or DMD.

"We are thrilled. This has been a goal for a long time and now we have it," said Dr. Susan Iannaccone, Associate Director of the National Institutes of Health-funded Wellstone Muscular Dystrophy Cooperative Research Center at UT Southwestern and co-Director of the MDA Pediatric Care Center at Children's Health. "This is public recognition on a national basis for the excellence of our program."

Dr. Diana Castro, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics and Neurology and Neurotherapeutics at UT Southwestern as well as a neurologist at Children's Health, said, "The main advantage of being a Certified Duchenne Care Center is for the families, because they can be absolutely reassured that the care we provide meets all the national standards."

Kathi Kinnett, PPMD's Clinical Care Advisor, noted that the Dallas team has shown immense dedication to care and growth of its Duchenne program over the last several years and has worked closely with the CDCC Certification Committee to meet the robust standards of certification.

Duchenne is a genetic disorder characterized by progressive muscle degeneration and weakness due to the alterations of the protein dystrophin that helps keep muscle cells intact. The as-yet incurable condition primarily affects boys – about 1 in every 3,500 is born with it worldwide – but in rare cases it can affect girls.

Approximately 300 young patients diagnosed with DMD have been referred to Drs. Iannaccone and Castro by their primary care provider, another pediatric neurologist, or through parental online searches. The group is currently participating in eight industry sponsored DMD clinical trials.

"Our team is also very active on a national and international level in clinical research," said Dr. Iannaccone. "We are part of the Wellstone Muscular Dystrophy research network, with Eric Olson serving as the Principal Investigator." Dr. Olson is Chair of Molecular Biology and Director of UTSW's Hamon Center for Regenerative Science and Medicine at UT Southwestern.

For several years, a UTSW research team led by Dr. Olson has been using CRISPR gene editing technology to develop potential treatments for Duchenne. In 2018, they reported success in halting the progression of DMD in a large mammal. The research published in *Science* documents unprecedented improvement in the muscle fibers of dogs with DMD with the use of a single-cut gene-editing technique to restore dystrophin in muscle and heart tissue by up to 92 percent of normal levels.

Dr. Iannaccone holds the Warren A. Weinberg, M.D. Chair in Pediatric Neurology and Learning.

Dr. Olson holds The Robert A. Welch Distinguished Chair in Science, the Pogue Distinguished Chair in Research on Cardiac Birth Defects, and the Annie and Willie Nelson Professorship in Stem Cell Research.

**More online:** Read the full story on *Center Times Plus* at [utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus](https://utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus).

## IN MEMORIAM

### Dr. Kenneth J. Leveno: Provided transformative obstetrics leadership

By Patrick Wascovich

Dr. Kenneth J. Leveno, a Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at UT Southwestern whose leadership helped transform the obstetrical service at Parkland Memorial Hospital into a preeminent model of clinical care and educational opportunity, died May 2. He was 78.

Most recently Vice Chair for Clinical Research in the UTSW Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Dr. Leveno championed translational investigations throughout his 44-year career at the University, often challenging colleagues and learners to think big about their work.

"Dr. Leveno was a true leader in American obstetrics and helped to shape its practice through his groundbreaking clinical research and opinions, hundreds of peer-reviewed publications, and participation in numerous national debates," said Dr. W. P. Andrew Lee, Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs, Provost, and Dean of UT Southwestern Medical School.

Dr. Steven Bloom, Chair of Obstetrics and Gynecology, counts himself among those he influenced, having interacted with Dr. Leveno while a UT Southwestern Medical School student, as an OB/Gyn intern and resident at Parkland, and as a faculty colleague.

"Dr. Leveno was a true triple threat – he was a highly skilled clinician, a brilliant researcher, and an inspiring teacher. For me as a student and trainee, and for many of my peers, we were drawn to the health care system that he was the key architect of," Dr. Bloom said. "He created an exemplary public health program for pregnant women. And as passionate as he was about patient care, he was equally passionate about measuring that care and analyzing outcomes to discover what worked and what didn't."

Dr. Leveno came to UTSW in 1976 as a fellow in maternal-fetal medicine and became an Ob/Gyn faculty member in 1978. Dr. Leveno also served as an editor for *Williams Obstetrics*, the authoritative text in the field. He co-authored the 19th through 25th editions.



Dr. Kenneth J. Leveno

In 1984, Dr. Leveno became the third Chief of Obstetrics at Parkland, a position he would keep for more than 20 years. Through his leadership, Dr. Leveno helped transform the obstetrical (OB) service into a gold standard model that led the nation in deliveries for several years.

A University of Notre Dame graduate, Dr. Leveno earned his M.D. from Creighton School of Medicine in 1968. He served in the U.S. Army Medical Corps from 1969 to 1973. Stationed in Army hospitals in Europe, the would-be heart surgeon was called upon to perform all medical services for military families, including delivering babies. That soon became his careerlong calling.

Dr. Leveno is survived by Margie, his wife of 54 years, four sons and one daughter and their spouses, and five grandchildren. One son and daughter-in-law – Dr. Matt Leveno, Assistant Professor of Internal Medicine, and Dr. Teresa Chan-Leveno, Associate Professor of Otolaryngology – Head & Neck Surgery – serve on the UTSW faculty.

Dr. Bloom holds the Jack A. Pritchard, M.D. Chair in Obstetrics and Gynecology.

See the endowed title held by Dr. Lee above.

**More online:** To read the full story, go to *Center Times Plus* at [utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus](https://utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus).



# Q&A with Dr. Elan D. Louis, Chair of Neurology and Neurotherapeutics

By Nyshicka Jordan

In April, Dr. Elan D. Louis joined UT Southwestern as Chair of Neurology and Neurotherapeutics. Considered by many to be the world's leading scholar on tremor disorders, particularly the most common of these, essential tremor (ET), Dr. Louis has conducted pioneering investigations on the epidemiology, genetics, and underlying pathology of ET and related tremor disorders.

Dr. Louis came to UTSW from the Yale School of Medicine, where he served from 2015 to 2020 as Professor of Neurology and Epidemiology, Chief of the Division of Movement Disorders, Associate Chair for Outpatient Research in Neurology, and co-Director of the Center for Neuroepidemiology and Clinical Neurological Research. Previously, he was a Professor of Neurology and Epidemiology at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons, where he once worked with Dr. William T. Dauer, now Director of UT Southwestern's Peter O'Donnell Jr. Brain Institute.

Dr. Louis is committed to raising the national profile of the Department of Neurology and Neurotherapeutics.

"Now is the time to appraise and reexamine everything in the Department, a time to redesign, to build and create," he said. "We are on the move."

Shortly after arriving on campus,



Dr. Elan D. Louis

Dr. Louis answered some questions for *Center Times* about his vision for the Department.

## What are your goals as Chair of the Department of Neurology and Neurotherapeutics?

My goals are to enhance the clinical, research, and educational efforts of the Department. We will develop a broad and vibrant research portfolio and increase the number of faculty who are receiving external grant support, particularly from the National Institutes of Health. In the next five years, I would like to catapult the Department to be

among the top 15 neurology departments in NIH funding, and in the next 10 years to reach the top 10. We will aim high and we will succeed.

Additionally, I would like us to design and put in place new destination clinical programs and programs of excellence to enhance and enrich what we as neurologists do best – take care of our patients. In education, which involves medical students, residents, and fellows, the Department already does wonderful things, and I would like to extend our reach so we draw in the best applicants from all over the country.

When trainees come here, I would like them to come to a Department that is as vibrant as possible and which offers unique opportunities for growth and development. Trainees should feel like kids in a candy store – wherever they look there is something that is interesting and enticing, something to learn more about, to delve into, and to explore. I'd like there to be as many varieties of candies as possible.

## How is the field of neurology evolving?

Across the country, neurology is undergoing a period of tremendous growth, a renaissance, with more subspecialization and new treatments coming into being. This is the result, in part, of greater collaborative efforts,

both within and across institutions. With the rise of the O'Donnell Brain Institute, and our own efforts, I believe that UT Southwestern Neurology will be propelled to a new level in the clinical, research, educational, and scholarly spheres. Now is our time.

## How do you see the partnership between Neurology and the O'Donnell Brain Institute evolving?

Dr. Dauer and I go back many years. We were residents together and junior faculty in the same department at Columbia, so we are spun from the same cloth and have a similar vision of promoting excellence within the institution. Dr. Dauer and I meet on a weekly basis to discuss our goals for jointly building new programs and leveraging strengths that Neurology and OBI bring to these joint efforts.

## Will you continue your research projects studying essential tremor?

Yes. We have the largest tremor research program in the world, and this is by a long shot. Being at UT Southwestern will open additional opportunities for collaboration with talented investigators here, and our research will continue to evolve into the future. Essential tremor is a neurological disease that affects about 7 million people in the United States and is as much as 20

times more common than Parkinson's disease. Tremors can be mild in some patients or severe in others, and very debilitating. There are only two frontline medications for this incurable condition, which is progressive, and there are no neuroprotective agents. So, there is a great need for better treatment options for patients. These can only evolve out of research and discovery.

## What other areas of research would you like to strengthen?

My background is in clinical and epidemiological research, so I would like to strengthen both of those domains. I would also like to enhance laboratory-based research efforts, and then I would like to build bridges between the laboratory and the clinic. By this I mean translational research and experimental therapeutics. There is so much we can do as neurologists and as a Department to advance our field. We stand at the center of the pathway into the future.

Dr. Dauer holds the Lois C.A. and Darwin E. Smith Distinguished Chair in Neurological Mobility Research.

Dr. Louis holds the Linda and Mitch Hart Distinguished Chair in Neurology.

## Update

Continued from page 1

employee transmission of COVID-19 from patients, and seven instances of employee-to-employee transmission on campus as of July 1, plans called for increased testing of employees and students exposed to the virus, he said.

UT Southwestern's response to the deadly coronavirus began early, starting with restrictions on official travel. By mid-March, more than 7,000 of the institution's 18,500 employees were asked to work from home. Nonurgent appointments and elective surgeries were postponed and research activities were suspended – except for a few labs conducting work directly related to COVID-19.

As the growth of COVID-19 cases initially flattened, elective surgeries and other nonurgent procedures began to be rescheduled in early May and clinics reopened for in-person patient visits. Research laboratories reopened in May at 25 percent of normal occupancy and then, on June 1, expanded to 50 percent.

Scientists were eager to resume

experiments, said Dr. David Russell, Vice Provost and Dean of Research. "While experimental research activities were paused, our scientists and trainees had more time to reflect on their projects as they worked at home doing data analyses and computations. They also got more involved with their peers while discussing published research in virtual journal clubs," Dr. Russell said.

Meanwhile, UT Southwestern's medical students missed out on months of firsthand training when clinical rotations were suspended to limit COVID-19 exposure in the hospitals and to preserve critical personal protective equipment, said Dr. Robert Rege, Associate Dean for both Undergraduate Medical Education and Continuing Medical Education.

Fourth-year medical students resumed clinical training June 1 and third-year students began clinical rotations at the end of June, he said. To make up for lost ground, some clerkship lengths are being shortened, he added.

The pandemic has complicated life for graduate students as well. About a third of UT Southwestern's 500 Ph.D. students are from outside the U.S., as are 70 percent of its 600 postdoctoral students, said Dr. Andrew Zinn, Dean of the UT Southwestern Graduate School of



New policies were put in place at campus buildings amid the pandemic to ensure staff and visitors are well enough to enter.

Biomedical Sciences. With U.S. embassies closed in some countries, new international students are finding it hard to get the visas they need to come to the U.S., Dr. Zinn said.

Future decisions to expand the UTSW campus reopening – or pull back – will be based on factors such as the number of COVID-19 patients at Clements University Hospital, supplies of personal protective equipment for

health care workers, and the level of exposure to the virus on campus as well as rate of transmission in the community, according to Dr. Podolsky.

To help both the University and its larger community make such important decisions, UT Southwestern experts in infectious diseases, bioinformatics, emergency medicine, and health system information resources developed a model for predicting the

virus's spread in North Texas. It relies on a variety of data, including population mobility and the effectiveness of social distancing measures. The forecasting model is updated weekly and shared with local and state public health officials in an effort led by Dr. Trish Perl, Chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases and Geographic Medicine, and Dr. Mujeeb Basit, Assistant Professor of Internal Medicine.

Dr. Perl, also a Professor of Internal Medicine, holds the Jay P. Sanford Professorship in Infectious Diseases.

Dr. Podolsky holds the Philip O'Bryan Montgomery, Jr., M.D. Distinguished Presidential Chair in Academic Administration, and the Doris and Bryan Wildenthal Distinguished Chair in Medical Science.

Dr. Russell holds the Eugene McDermott Distinguished Chair in Molecular Genetics.

Dr. Zinn holds the Rolf Haberecht and Ute Schwarz Haberecht Deanship of the UT Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences.

**More online:** Read the full story on *Center Times Plus* at [utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus](https://utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus).

## Telehealth

Continued from page 1

able. Successful implementation of virtual care has largely relied on communication and group problem-solving since the new territory comes with connectivity issues, technical glitches, and computer errors that physicians must troubleshoot in real time.

Dallas County extended shelter-in-place orders through April, and UT Southwestern announced in March that it would postpone or reschedule any upcoming nonurgent office visits, such as routine checkups or tests, until after June 1.

To serve patients in the meantime, the institution fast-tracked deployment of a virtual care platform originally set to launch in late spring or early summer, said Alan Kramer, Assistant Vice President of Health System Emerging Strategies. As a result, the number of video visits has skyrocketed since mid-March. On average, UTSW clinics had been providing four telehealth visits per day. But as of April 7 that number surged to about 1,600 per day and counting.

Many providers like Dr. Almandoz said moving toward telehealth was much easier than they expected. However, virtual care does come with some trade-offs.

"In the Weight Wellness Program, our interdisciplinary team works hard on developing patient trust and rapport," said Dr. Almandoz, who used telehealth for the first time in March. "Some of



Dr. Benjamin Greenberg delivers care to a patient during a telehealth visit in his clinic.

the nuances in body language and vocal tone that we instinctively rely on may not be as apparent through a computer monitor, so to compensate for that we are engaging with patients to make sure that things aren't lost in translation."

Dr. Surendra Barshikar, Assistant Professor of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (PM&R) and Medical Director of the UTSW and Parkland PM&R Clinics, said trainings helped clinicians learn the ins and outs of the new system. PM&R also had zero telehealth visits prior to the rollout.

"Within a week we had to bring virtual care live," he said. "Some providers tagged along with others during video visits to observe until they were comfortable using the technology on their own. Our physicians have handled the transition well, but some of our biggest challenges come from the patients' side of the screen."

## How it works

The virtual care platform is managed within UT Southwestern's Epic electronic health record system. Providers use Epic to conduct their video visit, and patients use the UTSW MyChart mobile application to communicate with their provider. The telehealth visit can be done with either a smartphone or a computer equipped with a video camera and microphone. Patients click on a link in MyChart to activate the visit.

"This is a major tool in our health care delivery transformation process," Mr. Kramer said. "We quickly mobilized and trained more than 1,400 physicians and advanced practice providers within primary care and 35 specialties and subspecialties to use the platform in all clinical departments at UT Southwestern and have been transitioning all in-person visits that can appropriately be handled by telehealth."

Mr. Kramer said the changing regulatory environment helped speed up deployment of virtual care. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) announced on March 17 that some restrictions on telehealth visits would be temporarily lifted due to COVID-19 to provide patients a wider range of services from their doctors without requiring travel to a health care facility.

UT Southwestern initially prioritized telehealth training to ensure the most vulnerable populations, such as patients of the Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center, Surgical Transplantation, and the Division of Geriatric Medicine, received access to virtual care as soon as possible.

In addition, UTSW has developed the processes that allow language interpreters to join video visits, enabling a seamless operation regardless of the patient's primary language.

## Early adopters

A handful of early adopters were ahead of the curve even before COVID-19 struck. One was the Department of Neurology and Neurotherapeutics, which was prepared to expand telehealth due to ongoing efforts to improve access.

Dr. Jaya Trivedi, Medical Director of Ambulatory Neurology and Professor of Neurology and Neurotherapeutics, said having incorporated telehealth capabilities earlier to serve patients remotely has paid off in the era of COVID-19.

"At this point today, I can offer a telehealth visit to any of our patients where it is clinically appropriate, allowing the patient to join from their home and our clinician to join from their academic office, clinic, or home," said Dr. Trivedi, also a member of the Peter O'Donnell Jr. Brain Institute.

"Everything has changed 180 degrees – and I cannot imagine going back to what it was before COVID-19 hit the U.S.," Dr. Trivedi said. "We will likely continue to see a rise in telehealth in the years to come."

**More online:** To read the full story, go to *Center Times Plus* at [utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus](https://utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus).



# How the pandemic changed life for four first-year residents

By Lori Sundeen Soderbergh

Drs. Iqra Zakaria, Jonathan Brewer, Danielle Rucker, and Deven Bhatia were more than halfway through their first year of residency at UT Southwestern when the COVID-19 pandemic added a heightened sense of urgency to their on-the-job training.

Like other health care workers, the emergency medicine doctors would quickly adjust to a new environment: learning how to correctly handle personal protective equipment (PPE), discovering new ways to care for patients while minimizing the risk of exposure, and juggling caring for themselves and their families while serving on the front lines of the health emergency.

As part of the Emergency Medicine program, the residents rotate through different ICU areas such as Pediatrics, Surgery, Burn Unit, and Toxicology as well as among three hospitals: William P. Clements Jr. University Hospital, Children's Medical Center Dallas, and Parkland Memorial Hospital.

They all knew residency would be a time of long hours and stressful experiences, but none expected a global pandemic to strike in their first year as doctors. Recently, they shared a window into their hectic lives and how the experience has strengthened their resolve to help patients.

"This is why we are doing this. We want to be the people who others come to for help in any situation," said Dr. Bhatia.

## Shift changes

Before the pandemic broke out, Dr. Rucker made it a practice to make a personal connection with her patients. She would enter a hospital room and pull a chair up to the bed so she could get to know each patient face to face.

Now, most check-ins are made from the door. Patients are wearing masks too, obscuring part of their expressions. Safety comes first. COVID-19 has changed the nature of doctor-



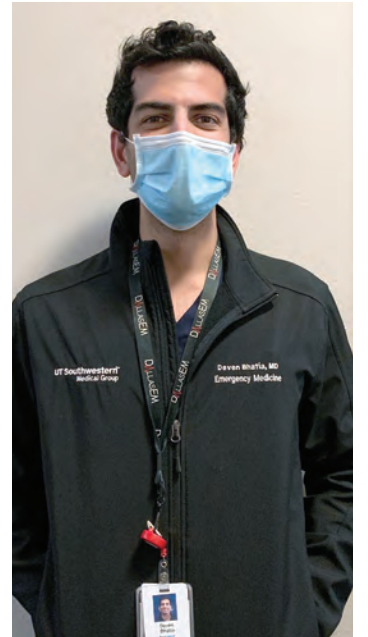
Dr. Iqra Zakaria



Dr. Jonathan Brewer



Dr. Danielle Rucker



Dr. Deven Bhatia

patient relationships.

"As more data comes out, we're learning that some restrictions may be in place for a year or more. It's a tough pill to swallow," said Dr. Rucker, without irony.

Some common routines are now different. When Dr. Zakaria arrives at Parkland each day, she goes to a specific entrance for a temperature check before entering the building. She no longer takes food, a backpack, or anything else with her to work, out of concern that she could inadvertently carry the virus back to her Uptown apartment. She doesn't eat during her shift out of safety concerns, and she keeps her mask on at all times.

The emergency department residents have become familiar with "donning and doffing," the process of putting on and taking off PPE: bou-

fant, N-95 mask, surgical mask, face shield, gown, and gloves. The gown and gloves are changed between visits to different patient rooms. The goal is to not infect anyone, at the hospital or outside. Multiple times each day, they sanitize their stethoscopes and hard surfaces where they work.

## 'A different energy'

The stations in the Parkland emergency department, called pods, are for both COVID and non-COVID patients. There may be up to a dozen patients under the care of one person at times. Most residents keep moving during the entire 12-hour shift. While that's not unusual, they've noticed that the energy in their department has changed.

"There's a different vibe in the hospital now,"

said Dr. Zakaria. "There's a baseline anxiety and uncertainty bubbling under the surface at all times, like an unnerving current."

The residents – and all the medical staff – rely on each other for support. They have seen the best and the worst of human behavior. "You can feel every single emotion on one shift," said Dr. Brewer. "You get that one victory and it carries you through the whole day."

What is a victory? When a COVID-19 patient is removed from a ventilator or someone has recovered from the virus and leaves the hospital. Each one is celebrated.

**More online:** Read the full story on *Center Times Plus* at [utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus](https://utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus).

# Medical School grads face challenges of launching careers during pandemic

By Nyschicka Jordan

On July 1, Dr. Sharon Sun stepped into the role she's been training for since 2016, when she joined a new class of residents in the anesthesiology program at NewYork-Presbyterian/Columbia Medical Center.

Under normal circumstances, the transition from medical student to physician is daunting. But members of the Class of 2020 have the added challenge of beginning their careers during the COVID-19 pandemic. For Dr. Sun, that means moving to an epicenter of the crisis, where more than 190,000 confirmed cases had been reported by mid-May.

Although Ms. Sun will be pursuing a career in anesthesiology, she'll spend her first year as an intern training across various hospital departments – and will potentially treat COVID-19 patients.

"I think I am as ready as I will ever be in these circumstances," Dr. Sun said. "While moving to New York is nerve-wracking, I'm excited to begin residency. It's a tough situation, but I'll do my best to take it in as a learning experience."

## Switching gears

Dr. Alexandra Pottorff, who began her residency in the Boston Children's Hospital pediatrics program in June, said the virus has been a topic of discussion since the beginning of the year. It didn't impact students, however, until mid-March.

"We had been hearing about the virus for a few months in other places across the world, but once it reached the U.S. it feels like the situation surrounding our classes changed very suddenly," Dr. Pottorff said.

She had been completing a Residency Essentials course and working in the student-run free clinic when Dallas County issued a shelter-in-place order on March 23. Like many MS4s, she also planned to take a final clinical elective, which had to be canceled.

Despite the disruptions, the pandemic had the least educational impact on fourth-year students who had nearly finished their medical education by the time the restrictions took effect, said Dr. Robert Rege, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Medical Education.

The biggest impact to the Class of 2020 has been emotional.

"The most disappointing part of the timing is that the fourth-years who have worked so hard have had to forgo the many well-deserved



Dr. Sharon Sun

celebrations that have been deep in tradition at UT Southwestern, including their senior banquet, AOA induction banquet, the premier of the senior film, the traditional hooding ceremony, and finally our 77th Commencement ceremony," Dr. Rege said.

Commencement was held as a virtual event on May 2, similar to changes made for Match Day in March.

Class President Dr. Oludamilola "Dami" Akinmolayemi, who is starting an internal medicine residency at Columbia in New York City, said these losses have been felt hard. As a class leader, he was heavily involved in planning the senior banquet that had been scheduled for March 13 when the event was canceled just two days before.

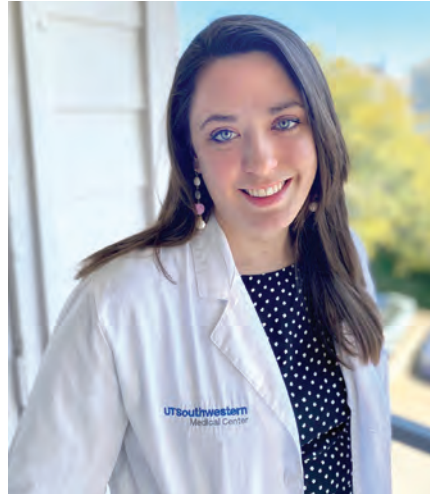
"I really wanted to use these opportunities to celebrate with classmates and say final good-byes, so it's sad that we're not going to have those last experiences as a class," said Dr. Akinmolayemi. "But of course as humans, we adapt and accept that these things can't happen right now."

## Holding pattern

Meanwhile, as most Class of 2020 graduates plan long-distance moves, travel hampered by the pandemic has created a number of logistical problems for the future residents. Some students have opted to sign leases sight unseen to avoid being left without housing.

It's an option Dr. Pottorff chose after viewing a rental video.

A separate issue for some students is how



Dr. Alexandra Pottorff



Dr. Oludamilola "Dami" Akinmolayemi

to handle current leases. Dr. Sun extended her current lease through June while she finalizes her moving plan. She was hoping to secure housing through Columbia utilizing a lottery system.

Similarly, Dr. Akinmolayemi said he is trying to determine how to make the move to New York. Dr. Akinmolayemi's immediate family lives in Nassau County, New York – an hour commute to the city. He said as a last resort he'll commute from his family's home until a more ideal living arrangement can be found.

**More online:** Read the full story on *Center Times Plus* at [utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus](https://utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus).

## Medical education programs shift gears for summer, fall

By Nyschicka Jordan

As uncertainty surrounding the pandemic continues, UTSW is trying to find workarounds for both its remaining students and incoming trainees.

For the time being, clinical students have all been placed into courses and electives that can be provided online and specialty advisers in each department are looking at mechanisms to provide further mentorship online. Once clinical restrictions are lifted, time will be reserved for clinical encounters.

"The challenges facing the current third-year class are numerous and depend on the length that pandemic-imposed restrictions last," said Dr. Robert Rege, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Medical Education. "Challenges include unknowns about when their national licensing exams (Step 2 CK and Step 2 CS) will resume, inability to currently begin clinical electives in specialties they are interested in, how the process and criteria for residency applications and interviews will alter this year, and currently the inability to complete visiting rotations at other institutions."

Meanwhile, leaders in Graduate Medical Education considered what changes would be needed for incoming residents.

"We have been collaborating with the hospitals in creating a virtual onboarding for our many new trainees. There are very few things that require trainees to be physically here before July 1. The rest, we are already planning on going virtual. For those items that require a physical presence, we are planning on maintaining physical distancing," said Dr. Larissa Velez, Associate Dean for Graduate Medical Education.

Dr. Velez said most UTSW residents are not involved in the direct care of COVID-19 patients. But they have experienced changes such as canceled rotations due to closed clinics and postponed elective surgeries. Long-term restrictions from the pandemic will impact senior-level residents' ability to do research, travel for professional presentations, and interviews for fellowships and jobs.

■  
*Dr. Velez holds the Michael Wainscott, M.D. Professorship in Emergency Medicine.*



# Student and resident mental health and wellness: It's OK to not be OK

By Lori Sundeen Soderbergh

Managing stress and anxiety is a normal part of life for medical students, residents, and fellows. But the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic presents a different type of psychological challenge for learners on campus.

"While medical school and graduate school can be difficult, the stress imposed or experienced is time-limited, discrete, and finite. Time is marked with milestones and goal posts, and the rituals associated with them," said Dr. Preston Wiles, Assistant Dean, Student and Resident Mental Health and Wellness.

"The pandemic limits or removes these rituals and changes the timing of them – or moves the goal post entirely," he said. "For people who crave certainty and the ability to control their lives, changes like these can produce much fear and anxiety."



Dr. Preston Wiles

A team of psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses, and social workers at Student Wellness and Counseling is available to offer assistance with a wide range of issues including anxiety, depression, marital problems, and learning challenges. The more than 1,700 students in the UT Southwestern Medical School, Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, and School of Health Professions can access these services, and a similar program exists for the more than 1,000 fellows and residents. The services covered by insurance and available to students, residents, and fellows have been temporarily moved online during the pandemic.

## Reducing the stigma

When Dr. Wiles first arrived at UT Southwestern in 2010 to take charge of the student mental health program, he was immediately confronted with a serious challenge. A student had recently committed suicide. As a trained child psychiatrist with 20 years of clinical practice at Yale University under his belt, Dr. Wiles was hired to ensure all possible steps were taken to prevent more cases.

## Contacts

**UT Southwestern Student Wellness and Counseling Center**  
S Building, South Campus  
Suite S2.100 (second floor)  
214-645-8680

**UT Southwestern Resident Wellness and Counseling Center**  
S Building, South Campus  
Suite S1.200 (first floor)  
214-648-9969

"Instead of treating suicide prevention as a dirty secret, we decided to make it our calling card," said Dr. Wiles, also Director of Student Wellness and Counseling and a Professor of Psychiatry.

Soon after his arrival, alumni gifts helped fund suicide prevention training for all second-year medical students. Every UT Southwestern student is now trained to recognize distress in fellow classmates and to actively respond. A peer advocate program can refer fellow students to resources and support, and the UT System funds a 24/7 crisis response hotline.

"If students are reluctant to come to our clinic, they can talk to another student first to address their fears. It's about both education and reducing the stigma surrounding mental health treatment. It's OK to not be OK. That's the drum we beat," said Dr. Wiles.

## Growing the program

The success of UT Southwestern's student mental health and wellness program is evident in its growth. During the past 10 years, annual visits to the clinic rose from 900 to 4,800, and the number of unique users quadrupled. A combination of building trust with the campus community and finding a better location for the clinic fueled this success.

"We see about 30 to 40 percent of students sometime during their studies here, which is consistent with research showing what student mental health and wellness programs experience nationwide," Dr. Wiles said.

Over the years, the student body has become more diverse in gender, race, and ethnicity. More than half of the students are now women. With such diversity, "you don't necessarily know what that individual student is experiencing. It's important to have a very open mind and not start with a predetermined set of biases based on your

experience," said Dr. Wiles. Today's students want to continue the personal growth that they began in college, challenge authority, and remain open to new ideas, he added.

## Toolbox for coping and recovery

Difficulty sleeping, a marked shift in ability to concentrate, rapid shifts in mood and anxiety, increased substance use, irritability, and preoccupation with negative thoughts are all indicators of the need to reach out for help, according to Dr. Wiles. He recommends the following coping tips for everyone feeling stressed by the COVID-19 crisis:

- Use slow breathing techniques.
- Cultivate awareness of the body's need for sleep, nutrition, and exercise.
- Focus on what you can control versus not control.
- Limit exposure to news media and social media.
- Stay safe and practice social distancing.

Students and residents also have access to mindfulness classes where they learn coping skills that can be applied throughout their professional lives.

Combining coping techniques with exercise and social activities can add to the toolbox for recovery, Dr. Wiles said.

"One of the most rewarding experiences for my team is when students who have experienced high levels of distress come back from it. They solidify the gains they've made in treatment, go into their specialties, and thrive during their residencies," he said.

For many, the first step toward better mental health is learning that it's OK to not be OK.

Dr. Wiles holds the Drs. Anne and George Race Professorship of Student Psychiatry.

## Advice from UTSW residents thrust into COVID-19 care

As the weeks turn into months in this pandemic, it can be hard to stay focused and positive, especially if residents face a combination of stressors at work and at home. UT Southwestern offers a variety of resources to help residents and other learners in this challenging time.

"At UT Southwestern, we have worked closely with our on-campus Wellness Center to provide assistance to residents who need emotional support; with the Office of Institutional Equity & Access to offer education; and to provide child care options for residents and fellows," explained Dr. Larissa Velez, Associate Dean for Graduate Medical Education, Professor of Emergency Medicine, Vice Chair for Education, and a Distinguished Teaching Professor. "It has also been wonderful to see how the community at large has contributed to our well-being."

As the residents prepared to enter their second year as doctors in July, four of them took a few minutes to reflect on lessons learned and what they want to share with the incoming class of residents.

"It's an honor and a privilege every day that you come to work," said Dr. Danielle Rucker. "In order to add value to your profession, you have to be well. Find ways to de-stress. Make sure you're well protected from infection."

Dr. Iqra Zakaria advised the next class of residents to take full advantage of the group support that is available. "These are unprecedented times with much uncertainty, but know that we are all here for you. Don't be afraid to rely on your colleagues, the upper levels, and the faculty. Trust all the education that has gotten you to this point."

"Burnout is a very real issue in medicine," said Dr. Jonathan Brewer. "Medicine as a whole is experiencing a newfound resiliency. Everyone is staying strong and it's very humbling to watch."

Dr. Deven Bhatia added a heartfelt thanks to paramedics and firefighters, nurses, ED technicians, radiology technicians, housekeeping crews, grocery store workers, and other essential workers who are putting themselves at risk during the pandemic too. He also expressed a broader word of encouragement that may help everyone:

"Everything else can shut down, but the ED will always remain open," he said. "We will be here for you."

Dr. Velez holds the Michael Wainscott, M.D. Professorship in Emergency Medicine.

## Study Continued from page 1

tant to the virus to survive and replicate," explained Dr. Schoggins, whose work focuses on viral infection and replication. "If the protease isn't working because it's blocked by another agent, the virus's other functions fall apart."

Many successful antiviral drugs, such as those that fight HIV and hepatitis C, are protease inhibitors, he added.

In the new study, Dr. Sadek and his colleagues again used computer modeling to perform a more targeted screen of approved drugs, focusing on their ability to bind either in the central part of the protease binding pocket or the terminal part of the binding pocket, and/or to covalently bind in these regions – a type of chemical interaction that results in irreversible blockage of the protein.

"Even if the drug comes off the pocket," Dr. Sadek said, "a covalent inhibitor forever changes the pocket's characteristics, which makes it harder for the enzyme to do its job."

Using this method, the team identified four promising candidates: atovaquone, a drug previously used to treat malaria that's currently used to treat toxoplasmosis, babesiosis, and Pneumocystic pneumonia; mebendazole, a drug that's used to treat several different parasitic worm infections; ouabain, a naturally occurring compound that was used as an arrow poison in Africa and is no longer approved in the U.S. but used in other parts of the world to treat heart failure; and dronedarone, a drug used to maintain heart rhythms.

Within a matter of weeks, Dr. Schoggins and his colleagues converted part of their laboratory space to a drug-screening facility equipped to safely handle SARS-CoV-2. The researchers first infected a line of nonhuman primate cells traditionally used to study viruses with SARS-CoV-2, then treated them with solutions with various concentrations of these drugs. Next, they performed tests to determine how much virus was in these cells to see how well SARS-CoV-2 was replicating.

Although dronedarone quickly showed toxic effects in these cells, the other three compounds effectively stemmed viral replication in doses similar or significantly lower than what's currently used to clinically treat other diseases. These effects held true when the drugs were tested in infected



Drs. Hesham Sadek and John Schoggins

human cells, although mebendazole's effects weren't as potent in the human cell line.

Of these three, atovaquone is uniquely promising, Dr. Sadek said. This drug is predicted to covalently attach to the protease binding pocket, does so at a dose lower than the therapeutic plasma concentrations currently used, has previously been reported to have antiviral activity against other RNA viruses, and has a long and established history for treating another infectious disease that affects the lungs.

The team plans to continue studying this drug in animal models of COVID-19 to see if it can effectively fight this disease. In addition to these preclinical models, Dr. Sadek added, he and his colleagues plan to test atovaquone in humans in clinical trials as soon as possible.

Other UTSW researchers who contributed to this study are Drs. Ayman Farag, Assistant Instructor of Internal Medicine, and Ping Wang, postdoctoral researcher in Internal Medicine, both from the Sadek lab. Contributors from the Schoggins lab are Jennifer Eitson, Senior Research Associate; Maikke Ohlson, Research Associate; Dr. Wenchun Fan, postdoctoral researcher; and Ian Boys and Matthew McDougal, graduate student researchers.

Dr. Sadek holds the J. Fred Schoellkopf, Jr. Chair in Cardiology.

Dr. Schoggins is a Nancy Cain and Jeffrey A. Marcus Scholar in Medical Research, in Honor of Dr. Bill S. Vowell.

## Nominata Continued from page 1

the highest honor bestowed upon an advanced student of the Graduate School.

"I was speechless after learning I won. It's such a remarkable distinction and I am humbly honored," Dr. Park said. "The award doesn't just matter for me, but also my colleagues and mentors who supported me. I didn't receive this award because I was a great student; it was because I had so many great mentors."

The Graduate Student Organization created the Nominata Award in 1980 to stimulate academic excellence and research achievement among advanced graduate students. The winner receives a monetary award and presents their research to the UT Southwestern community. In May, Dr. Park presented his dissertation in a University Lecture Series held virtually because of the pandemic.

In addition, George Wendt of the Medical Scientist Training Program and a student in the Cell and Molecular Biology Graduate Program, is the recipient of a Dean's Discretionary Award, which reflects his notable research accomplishments and extraordinary ability to communicate science outside of his field.

In February, Dr. Park published a paper on his research, Mechanical Regulation of Glycolysis Via Cytoskeleton Architecture, in *Nature*. He said exploring molecular coupling between cell mechanics and cell metabolism may help scientists better understand why tumors progress, potentially leading to new therapies.

"Basically, molecular coupling means that these two biological functions – mechanics and metabolism – are cross-linked and able to communicate with each other. In the cancer field, we know that cell mechanics is important for cancer progression, and altered cell metabolism is considered one of the hallmarks of cancer. My study suggests that these two processes are interconnected and thus, one could therapeutically modify one process to affect the other," Dr. Park said.

Dr. Park earned his Ph.D. under the mentorship of Dr. Gaudenz Danuser, Chair of the Lyda Hill Department of Bioinformatics. He is a graduate of the Cancer Biology Graduate Program and the Mechanisms of Disease and Translational Science track. The track gave him exposure to a clinical

environment that enhanced his research training.

"One of my favorite things about being a student was having tremendous opportunities and freedom. What is amazing about UT Southwestern is how well the institution incorporates opportunities for basic scientists and clinicians to work together to tackle research that matters," Dr. Park said.

The native of South Korea came to the United States when he was 11 years old. His family then moved to Canada, where he attended high school and college.

Long term, the scientist said he'd like to understand how his discovery might impact other types of cancer.

"We have underappreciated how the pathology of cells can regulate their function through their cytoskeleton architecture, or structure. There are new mechanisms that can regulate the coupling between cell mechanics and cell metabolism that can be used as critical opportunities to treat cancer," Dr. Park said.

In March, the biologist moved to New York City to begin a postdoctoral fellowship in the lab of Joan Massagué at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. The transition came as New York became the epicenter for the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

"It was quite a unique experience beginning my new position that way," Dr. Park said. "But I was lucky as I was able to make the transition at the end of my thesis project, so I was able to make a new start in New York without any research disruption despite the pandemic."

As a postdoctoral fellow, he is studying how cancer cells can undergo molecular and behavioral changes that drive their spread to distant organs.

"The perspective I learned training at UT Southwestern in basic science and clinical research taught me how to identify crucial questions that can be used to pursue therapeutic opportunities and apply that in my current role," Dr. Park said. "Taking the next step in my career has been phenomenal and exciting. It will be challenging to become a better scientist, but I am happy to be here in my next phase."

Dr. Danuser holds the Patrick E. Haggerty Distinguished Chair in Basic Biomedical Science.



# State of Nursing address highlights past year's triumphs and challenges

By Courtney Borchert

"I'm reminded of what Florence Nightingale said: 'how very little can be done under the spirit of fear,'" UT Southwestern's Chief Nurse Executive Susan Hernandez, MBA, B.S.N., RN, told a virtually packed house during her fifth annual State of Nursing address. "I think many would acknowledge that there have been times of fear through the coronavirus pandemic and that is OK. But it hasn't stopped us from doing amazing work."

Due to COVID-19 precautions, Ms. Hernandez delivered her annual message to hundreds of nurses and medical professionals via livestream on May 8. The event took place during National Nurses Week, the American Nurses Association's weeklong celebration that honors nurses' contributions to society each year from May 6 to May 12. Her remarks coincided with the World Health Organization's designation of 2020 as Year of the Nurse and Midwife, and touched on topics like nurse resiliency.

During her address, Ms. Hernandez said 2020 posed monumental and unique challenges for health care workers. It has been uncertain. It has been exhausting. But the circumstances have not hindered heroes in health care from serving others, she said.

While it is not news to Ms. Hernandez that our health care workers are superheroes, she said the North Texas community has witnessed



Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, UTSW nursing staff entered new personal protective equipment training. Responding to the health crisis is one of the challenges facing the Health System this year.

firsthand the strength, courage, and compassion of nurses on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Our nurses come to work every single day expecting to be excellent and to do excellent work," Ms. Hernandez said. "There is a palpable commitment to making sure that the patient is well taken care of and still has the best experience possible despite challenges that may exist in light of what we are going through these days."

In her comments, Ms. Hernandez cited how multidisciplinary teams have come together to achieve greatness. And with the Health System on an upward trajectory in research, patient care, and performance, UT Southwestern is geared toward a brighter future.

She said there is much to celebrate

and outlined some of the areas where UTSW is gaining ground:

- In fiscal year 2019, UTSW saw an additional 144,873 outpatient visits, about a 10 percent increase from the prior year, despite reduced outpatient visits since March due to the coronavirus.

- UTSW continues to retain top talent and boasts nearly an 86 percent retention rate for nurses.

- Since fiscal year 2017, the number of certified nurses has increased from 895 to 1,207.

- In the last year, nursing research hit its 100th publication milestone.

- Patient flu kiosks in ambulatory clinical locations exceeded expectations and provided 1,951 vaccinations.

- UT Southwestern earned regional recognition from *D Magazine's* Excel-

lence in Nursing Awards with nine RNs honored. Likewise, the DFW Great 100 Nurses organization recognized seven UTSW nurses.

Another notable achievement occurred in July when UT Southwestern's Nurse Residency Program was accredited as a Practice Transition Accreditation Program (PTAP) by the American Nurses Credentialing Center. UT Southwestern became the 112th site in the world to earn PTAP accreditation. Transition to practice programs increases clinical confidence and competence in nurses who are transitioning between settings and roles. This distinction further elevates UTSW's Nurse Residency Program, which was launched in 2016 as part of a plan to recruit and retain top nursing school graduates.

Ms. Hernandez said the road ahead is full of even more opportunities to push the envelope as an institution that is rapidly expanding its reach. She mentioned how many of the recent construction projects will allow UTSW to continue to grow in coming years, including the new 12-story tower opening its doors in October at William P. Clements Jr. University Hospital, partnerships like the collaborative medical campus in Frisco with Texas Health Resources, and UT Southwestern Medical Center at RedBird coming December 2021.

Among the accolades and innovative projects happening at UT Southwestern, Ms. Hernandez touted the exceptional clinical care that led to *U.S. News & World Report* ranking UT Southwestern the No. 1 Best Hospital in Dallas-Fort Worth and the No. 2 Best Hospital in Texas for the third consecutive year.

"UT Southwestern nurses are the best of the best," Ms. Hernandez said. "I have watched you adapt, pivot, lead, and continue to deliver excellent patient-centered care under extraordinary circumstances. It has been nothing short of awe-inspiring. You have been willing to learn and have been willing to step up together as a team. You all are out there doing amazing work and that will continue."

**More online:** Read the full story on *Center Times Plus* at [utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus](https://utsouthwestern.edu/ctplus).

## Therapy dogs comfort UTSW hospital heroes

The UT Southwestern Health System kicked off May as Mental Health Awareness Month by bringing in therapy dogs to support health care workers at William P. Clements Jr. University Hospital.



## Singers lift spirits of health care workers with healing power of music

By Courtney Borchert

Clusters of face masks and scrubs filled almost every inch of available screen space as health care workers joined the Zoom meeting. Anticipation grew as the host dropped hints about the surprise celebrity guest they were about to meet.

The country musician was the first woman to win "The Voice." Her duet with Chris Young titled "Think of You" reached the top of the Billboard Country Airplay chart. And, finally, the Grammy-nominated, platinum-certified singer-songwriter headlined the CMT Next Women of Country Tour in 2019.

Soon Cassadee Pope's face and warm voice greeted UTSW viewers from Nashville, Tennessee, and she sang two songs: "Take You Home" and "One More Red Light."

"UTSW is making things happen," Ms. Pope told the audience. "My heart is with you guys, you're on the front lines and you're spending time away from your families and taking care of everyone. I can't tell you how much that means to me."

The live virtual concert hosted by Musicians On Call (MOC) attracted more than 100 UT Southwestern health care workers at shift change on April 22. It was one of several events that has been held to bolster the spirits of front-line medical workers coping with the stress of COVID-19.

Chief Nurse Executive Susan Hernandez, MBA, B.S.N., RN, said shared moments such as these provide an opportunity for UT Southwestern staffers to take time to replenish their stores of mental, emotional, and physical energy.

"With people around the world pressing pause on shaking hands and physically attending large get-togethers during the ongoing coronavirus crisis, many people find themselves searching for opportunities to recreate a sense of community and togetherness," Ms. Hernandez said. "I've been moved by how we are all finding ways to care for each other. We are social distancing, but we are not socially disconnected."

Musicians On Call is a nonprofit organization that aims to bring a dose of joy to patients, families, and caregivers in health care settings like UTSW. MOC typically brings live and recorded music from volunteers to the bedsides of patients in hospitals across the U.S., but has adjusted accordingly during the pandemic to safely share the power of music with some of those who need it most: front-line medical workers.

"Since we can't go room to room right now, we wanted to bring UTSW a virtual program," MOC CEO Pete Griffin said. "We love you all so much and know how much you are all doing – especially now. Times are tough and we want to make sure that you know we're on call for you."

Michelle Roberson, a Nurse Manager for the Acute Care for Elders Unit at William P. Clements Jr. University Hospital, said medical staff have been flooded with other supportive gestures. "I'm touched that so many people are thinking about us," she said. "We're seeing our staff members be taken care of in a holistic way."

In May, the UT Southwestern Health System brought in therapy dogs to help health care staff cope with stress related to COVID-19 work. And since March, North Texans have stepped



Cassadee Pope

up by providing nonstop donations of meals and medical supplies. Among the donations have been "ear savers," small tools that make masks more comfortable for long-term wear by removing pressure and friction from the ears.

"Our community really thought about everything," Ms. Roberson said. "Even the smallest surprises – like sidewalk chalk messages of encouragement – can bring so much joy for the rest of the day and set the tone for an entire shift."

Donald Jones, RN, Emergency Room Administrative Clinical Coordinator, agreed with that sentiment and offered up his own musical talents to lift the spirits of his colleagues. Mr. Jones, a Dallas Opera member, performed both in the front lobby and back entrance of Clements University Hospital in April with the objective of inspiring fellow health care workers with songs like "Lean on Me" and Simon & Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water."

"Music has the ability to connect people, and to me that's the most beautiful thing," Mr. Jones said.

As National Nurses Week ended on May 12, Mandi Longoria, the Magnet Program Manager from the Clinical Education and Professional Practice team, summed up the sentiment that the well-being of health care workers is a priority: "Our senior leadership recognizes that if we are not taking care of ourselves, it is very challenging to continue to pour from an empty cup."

Ms. Longoria said relationship-based care (RBC) is the nursing professional practice model at UT Southwestern. RBC focuses on three specific relationships: care of self, care of team, and care of the patient.

"As a Magnet designated facility, it is vital to embrace the nursing professional practice model now more than ever," she said. "The leaders at UTSW want to make sure that our staff feel that measures are put into place to help us care for ourselves and our teams, so that we as health care providers can focus on our why ... the patients and their families."

Under the direction of Ms. Hernandez, the hospital earned this honor from the American Nurses Credentialing Center in 2016. The designation is the nation's highest form of recognition for nursing excellence and serves as a benchmark for quality of care.