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New clinic sets sights on precursors of blood cancers

Each year, thousands of people learn – usually after a routine blood test – that they have a condition that may develop into a blood cancer such as leukemia or lymphoma. The news is often followed by an equally surprising addendum: The condition won't be treated until it becomes a full-fledged cancer.

The lack of treatments for such “precursor conditions” places patients in an awkward limbo: seemingly healthy but waiting for their disease to progress to the point where it's treatable. Scientists have puzzled over why some people with these conditions go on to develop cancer quickly while others never do, and whether treatment could arrest the disease at the precursor stage.

Advances in genomic technology have given researchers the tools to study the switch from precursor condition to cancer in unprecedented detail. By understanding the fundamental changes that occur in cells' DNA – and *when* those changes occur – investigators hope to break the process down to its key components and, ultimately, develop targeted therapies capable of halting the process.

To lead that effort at Dana-Farber/Brigham and Women's Cancer Center (DF/BWCC), researchers have joined to create the Blood Cancer Prevention of Progression Clinic (BCPC), the first such facility in the United States. Comprised of experts in a variety of hematological (blood) disorders, the clinic has begun collecting tissue samples from patients with precursor conditions and from those with advanced disease. The samples will be analyzed to tease out

genomic differences between early- and later-stage disorders, and identify which ones lead the march toward cancer.

“In cancer, we're always looking to diagnose malignancies in their earliest stages, when they often can be treated successfully,” says Robert Soiffer, MD, chief of the Division of Hematologic Malignancies at DF/BWCC and co-principal investigator at the BCPC.

“In many hematologic malignancies and disorders, precursor conditions provide this kind of advance notice. The challenge now is to use this knowledge to our advantage – to learn how to ‘read’ the tissue of patients with precursor conditions to determine which cases are likely to advance and which can benefit from early treatment.”

Multiple guises

Precursor conditions take a variety of forms and go by many names. Early myelodysplastic syndrome, a disease in which the bone marrow fails to make enough healthy blood cells, is often a precursor of



The Blood Cancer Prevention of Progression Clinic created by DF/BWCC clinicians and researchers aims to drive a new understanding of blood cancer precursors.

Poet gains insight – and material – through treatment

As a poet, Richard Fox has always used his own life as a source of creative inspiration. It's no surprise, then, that the past few years have been one of his most productive artistic periods.

Fox began treatment at Dana-Farber for throat and tongue cancer on Feb. 2, 2010, his 57th birthday. It took 16 months of chemotherapy, radiation, and recovery until he felt well enough to write poetry again, and when he did, he quickly found that his experience had a powerful influence on his work.

“The idea with poetry is to write about yourself, but not explicitly,” says Fox, of Worcester, Mass. “You focus on the intent of the poem, and you come out. Cancer is such a defining experience in someone's life; it's where my mind kept going. So I let it go there.”

Fox says he felt “freer and more focused” after his treatment, and also wanted to share what he learned from his time at Dana-Farber. The results are poems that touch on cancer from a patient's point of view and draw on the themes of humor, hope, and unforeseen gifts. Several are included in the “Better Living through Cancer” section of his book, *Time Bomb*, which was published last year.

One of Fox's most popular cancer-themed poems in the book is “Chemo Brain.” By describing an individual who suddenly has trouble navigating a supermarket he has gone to since he was a child, the poem touches on the fatigue and disorientation that can come during, and following, chemotherapy treatment. Fox can relate; although his poetry was on the back-burner during treatment, he blogged about his experience daily, until chemo brain made it too difficult.

Hundreds gather to support young breast cancer patients

Bridget Slotemaker was just 35 when she was diagnosed with stage IV cancer while 20 weeks pregnant. She never lived to learn the fate of her second daughter, Chloe, who would survive and thrive, despite weighing just 1 pound 2 ounces at birth. Bridget Mooney Spence was just 21 when she was diagnosed with stage IV metastatic breast cancer, but she continued to live life and inspire those around her for nearly a decade until her death in 2013.

These are just two of the many young women diagnosed with cancer each year, a population often overlooked in the cancer community. More than 14,500 of these young women, like Mooney Spence, are diagnosed with breast cancer in the United States annually. Dana-Farber's *Young and Strong: Program for Young Women with Breast Cancer* honored their memories, and all current and former young breast cancer patients and survivors, at its first annual Celebrating



TV reporter and breast cancer survivor Kelley Tuthill (right) emceed the Celebrating Young and Strong event on Oct. 17.

Breast cancer patients, page 3

Poet, page 3

Friends continue to fund powerful research at Dana-Farber



Members of the board of the Friends of Dana-Farber Cancer Institute gathered to unveil a new brand identity (at right) and confirm new leaders.



scientific officer, was also present to discuss Profile and the promise of precision cancer medicine for Dana-Farber patients, a project funded solely through philanthropy. “Your selfless dedication is really admirable, particularly your support of research,” remarked Rollins of Friends’ funding. “This is a very difficult time for research to be done in this country, and the support that you provide is absolutely invaluable.” ^[SEW]

The Power of Friends was strong at the Friends of Dana-Farber Cancer Institute’s 39th annual meeting, where the Friends unveiled its new brand identity and announced its contribution of more than \$3.1 million to the Institute in 2013-14. The Friends will allocate more than \$760,000 to research and patient care programs at Dana-Farber in the coming year.

The Friends also announced its new co-president, Jen Cunningham Butler; three new members at large, Eileen MacElroy, Elaine Zouzias Thibault, and Lori Whelan; and a new governing director, Elaine Tinetti. Cunningham Butler, who joins Debbie Maltzman to lead the Friends in the coming year, is the daughter of the Friends’ founding president, Sheila Driscoll Cunningham.

“The Friends play a role in everything that is done here; we truly make a difference,” said Marci Noller, outgoing president, who introduced the Friends’ new logo and “Power of Friends” tagline, which represents the organization’s evolution and effort to attract the next generation of Friends’ members and leaders.

The majority of Friends’ funds come from annual events, including An

Evening with Friends, the organization’s spring gala, which raised nearly \$283,000 in 2014. The Chefs Cooking for Hope, Saks Key to the Cure in Boston, and Dancing for a Cure events, as well as proceeds from Friends’ Corner Gift Shop, general contributions, and membership dues, also contributed to the fundraising total.

“Your work and support have launched the careers of so many people who have made a difference here at Dana-Farber and for our patients,” said Institute President and CEO Edward J. Benz Jr., MD, referencing the fellows the Friends fund each year. This year the organization is supporting Raj Gopal, MD, PhD, who studies cancer metabolism.

Board member Susan Mendoza Friedman, who organizes Dancing for a Cure’s annual holiday shows and Dance Marathon on Cape Cod, received the Sidney Farber Volunteer Award, named for the Institute’s late founder and made possible by the Rowena and Charles Simberg Oncology Leadership Fund. Friedman will direct the \$10,000 award money to Joyce Liu, MD, of the Susan F. Smith Center for Women’s Cancers, and her research into drug combinations to treat women with recurrent ovarian

cancer, a project also supported by an additional \$20,000 of Friends funding. “I support this project in memory of my dear friend, Karen Schek, and the 14,000 other women who die of ovarian cancer each year,” Friedman said.

Barrett Rollins, MD, PhD, chief



An Epic Journey

DFCI Partners eCare FAQs

A recent Partners eCare survey revealed that there are still a lot of questions around Partners eCare at Dana-Farber. Because it’s so vitally important that all faculty and staff understand the project and how it will change the way we do business, we’ve created a quick primer of the project’s key points.

Is Partners eCare the same as Epic?

You will hear this project referred to as both “Partners eCare” and “Epic.” Partners eCare is the name of the **integrated electronic health and administrative information system** that will be implemented at DFCI on **May 30, 2015**. Epic Systems is the vendor providing the technology that drives the Partners eCare system. Epic software will replace most of the existing clinical and administrative systems at DFCI. Both terms refer to the same project.

Which systems will be replaced and which will stay the same?

Being replaced:	Staying the same:
• GE/IDX	• Sunquest (new, shared Partners-wide)
• ILMR/LOE	• RTLS
• COE	• BOE
• DFCI Pharmacy system	• OnCore
• BICS	• OncPro
• MedAptus (for most areas)	• CORIS/DART
	• Percipio (behind the scenes)

What will training involve and who will it affect?

More than 3,500 DFCI faculty and staff will be affected by this implementation. To prepare, the Partners eCare team is coordinating extensive training sessions. Registration for these sessions will begin in December. Training will take place at 10 Brookline Place from **March 30 – May 29, 2015**. Completion of training and a basic competency test are mandatory. For required training hours and more information, visit the Training section of the Partners eCare page on DFCI Online.

At a minimum, the following groups will be provided with training on the new system:

- Physicians
- Registration staff
- Pharmacy staff
- Nursing staff
- Scheduling staff
- Imaging staff
- Clinical staff
- Support staff
- Billing staff
- Research staff
- Health Information Management staff

To learn more, visit the Partners eCare site on [DFCI Online](#). If you still have questions, email PeC_DFCI@dfci.harvard.edu. ^[AS]

Blood cancers, continued from page 1

acute myeloid leukemia (AML), a cancer of blood-forming cells. Myeloproliferative neoplasms, growths that cause the bone marrow to produce too many blood cells, can also lead to AML. Smoldering multiple myeloma, which occurs when abnormal plasma cells arise in the bone marrow, is often a predecessor of multiple myeloma, a bone marrow cancer.

Beyond their common identity as heralds of cancer, precursor conditions differ in how likely they are to progress to cancer, how quickly they will do so, and how they behave from one patient to another. Smoldering myeloma, for example, has a 50 percent chance of progressing to myeloma in two to three years, whereas a condition known as monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance has only a 1 percent chance, annually, of advancing to a cancer such as myeloma, lymphoma, or Waldenstrom’s macroglobulinemia, says BCPC co-principal investigator Irene Ghobrial, MD, medical oncologist in the DF/BWCC Jerome Lipper Multiple Myeloma Center and director of the Michele & Stephen Kirsch Laboratory at Dana-Farber. She and Soiffer are joined by David Steensma, MD, and Benjamin Ebert, MD, PhD, both of the DF/BWCC Adult Leukemia Program, as the new clinic’s co-principal investigators.

“At this point, we don’t have a reliable way of determining which patients’ conditions are likely to progress and which are likely to remain stable,” Ghobrial remarks. “We’re hoping that research at the BCPC will enable us to better determine who is at greatest risk of progression and are the best candidates for treatment.” ^[RL]

Get your flu shot by November 7

November 7 is the last day of Dana-Farber’s employee flu shot program, so be sure to get your vaccination this week. For more information, call Occupational Health Services at **617-632-3016**.

