UPMC
LIFE CHANGING MEDICINE

Palliative Research CENTER PaRC

February 2025

Palliative Care News

Message from Jane and Yael

We are thrilled to open 2025 by sharing the many accomplishments and happenings in the Section of Palliative Care, the Palliative Research Center (PaRC), and the UPMC Palliative and Supportive Institute. These accomplishments include expanding our palliative care program, grant support to improve billing practices and wellness, and the annual PaRC retreat.

In addition to spotlighting our staff and faculty, we highlight a patient story that exemplifies how palliative care is making a difference in the lives of patients and families in western Pennsylvania and beyond.

Read on!

Jane Schell, MD

Section chief, Palliative Care and Medical Ethics
Medical director, UPMC Palliative and Supportive Institute

Yael Schenker, MD

Associate chief of research, Section of Palliative Care and Medical Ethics
Director, Palliative Research Center (PaRC)

Supporting Palliative Care

Through education, research, community partners, and clinical programs, we are discovering and implementing innovative ways to enhance quality of life for all patients and families living with serious illness.

Your gift matters.

Learn more

Events

Any quality-of-life tal
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Palliative Research Center Retreat

The Palliative Research Center (PaRC) held its annual retreat in October. Over 75 attendees from across western Pennsylvania gathered at the University Club to hear from experts in palliative care research.

Kimberly S. Johnson, MD, delivered the keynote address. The speech, *Disparities in Serious Illness Care for African Americans: Why We Must See Color*, is **available here**.

Jane Schell, MD, moderated the panel discussion, *Examining Priorities, Challenges, and Opportunities of Western PA Community Leaders*.

Check out the retreat program guide, including panelist bios and research posters.

Palliative Care
Year(s) in Review
2023-2024

Medicine Grand Rounds

Gina Piscitello, MD, and Maria Lowry, PharmD, presented *Year in Review: Palliative Care* at the University of Pittsburgh Department of Medicine Grand Rounds in September. The presentation highlighted the latest advances in palliative care.

Guest Speaker

Claire Douglas, BSc (1st Hons), traveled from Scotland, the United Kingdom (UK), to present at the Palliative Care Grand Rounds in October. Her speech was titled *Palliative Care for Patients with Advanced Chronic Kidney Disease: The Development of an Integrated Renal Supportive Care Service in Scotland, UK*.

Neuropalliative Care:
Navigating Decisions about Life and Death
with Case Examples

Tara Cook Lecture Series

Christina Vaughan, MD, from the University of Colorado, was the guest speaker for the Tara Cook Memorial Neuropalliative Care Visiting Professor Lecture Series in October. The annual lecture honors Tara Cook, MD, a beloved and highly regarded faculty member in the Section of Palliative Care and Medical Ethics, who died in 2021.

Dr. Vaughan presented *The Evolution of Neuro-Palliative Care at One of the First Clinics in North America.*

Julie Childers, MD, and Rene Claxton, MD, presented a poster authored by a former Gleitsman scholar at the 9th Annual Academy of Distinguished Medical Educators Med Ed Day in September. Their poster was titled *A Communication Course to Teach Fellows How to Address in-the-Moment Patient/Family Explicit Bias Toward Clinical Team Members.* Dr. Claxton won an award for best poster from a faculty member.

Quarterly Lunches

The palliative care teams enjoy lunch together, focusing on team-building and morale.

White Elephant Party

The palliative care team gathered in December for a holiday social event and swapped gifts.

Program Highlights

Service Line Leadership

The UPMC Palliative and Supportive Institute (PSI) introduced the following leadership updates in 2024.

- **Amar Bansal, MD** — Director, quality and metrics.
- **Mamta Bhatnagar, MD** — Director, outpatient program.
- **Karl Bezak, MD** — Director, innovation and technology.
- **Rene Claxton, MD** — Director, education and professional development.
- **Linda King, MD** — Director, clinical affairs and operations.
- **Maria Lowry, PharmD** — Clinical director, pharmacy services.

PSI has been integral in creating the palliative care service line. The vision is to improve quality and access to palliative care across the UPMC system through a focus on quality and clinical outcomes, standardization of clinical care, cross-facility collaboration, optimization of resources, and dissemination of education.

UPMC Washington Partnership

Mamta Bhatnagar, MD, and palliative care leadership partnered with UPMC Washington radiation oncology and medical oncology to provide palliative care telemedicine visits to oncology patients. The expansion allows patients to present for a telemedicine appointment in the UPMC Washington radiation oncology office.

Telemedicine

We have expanded our Telepalliative Care team and program. Kaitlyn Lersch, PA-C, joined the telemedicine team along with Karl Bezak, MD, and Sara Hayes, PA-C in September. The program will now provide inpatient telemedicine to UPMC Hamot and UPMC McKeesport.

MusiCare Caroling

Eighteen medical students from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine who participate in MusiCare collaborated with Rhiannon Rieger, MMT, for a caroling session at UPMC Magee-Womens Hospital. MusiCare is a student-led music group that brings comfort to hospital patients and health care providers through musical performance. Rhiannon provides music therapy on behalf of palliative care.

The performance coincided with the first snowfall of the season in Pittsburgh, making for a particularly festive experience.

End-Stage Renal Disease Concurrent Care

The UPMC Palliative and Supportive Institute (PSI) partners with Family Hospice, part of UPMC, and Dialysis Clinic, Inc. (DCI) in an innovative concurrent care program for end-stage kidney disease patients receiving dialysis with limited life expectancy.

This program allows qualifying patients to continue dialysis while accessing hospice care when the goal of care is palliative. It alleviates a longstanding barrier to the benefits of hospice services for patients and caregivers who need expertise in pain and symptom management and psychosocial support at the end of life.

The Aston family found this program a valuable resource in navigating the final months of life for their beloved husband and father, Charlie. Charlie was a dialysis patient at DCI Canterbury while a resident in long-term care at Canterbury Place.

Described as gentle, funny, and curious about the world, Charlie was always one to make the best of a difficult situation. When his care dictated a change in his living environment, Charlie fashioned a warm and welcoming room at Canterbury, full of photos, rare books, and even miniature trains that reflected his joys and passions.

Over time, Charlie's condition declined. His circulation worsened, leading to very uncomfortable symptoms like pronounced itching and swelling in his hands and arms. Additionally, surgeons were suggesting amputation due to a deteriorating leg wound. The Astons were weighing Charlie's prognosis and his potential quality of life.

"Watching his body succumb was difficult," recalls Jean, Charlie's wife. "He couldn't do what he wanted any longer."

With Charlie's capacity to understand the consequences of treatment options dwindling, Jean and her children leaned into the support of the concurrent care team. The team included Jane Schell, MD, and nursing staff from DCI and Family Hospice. Together, they helped bridge the transition from dialysis and life-prolonging treatment in Charlie's familiar space to inpatient end-of-life care in a dedicated hospice unit at Canterbury Place.

"Everybody on the care team wanted the best for my father," says Sarah, Charlie's daughter. "During those weeks, the care was intentional and collaborative. We felt respected by the team. They listened to us, they guided us, and they communicated with us."

Charlie lived his final days at Family Hospice's inpatient unit. His family remains grateful for the relief from suffering, the peace and calm, and the room to gather and sit vigil, which the unit afforded Charlie and them.

"My son was reading to him from his favorite book, *Walden* (by Henry David Thoreau), when he passed," Jean says. "He was true to his nature to the end."

- ***Journal of the American Society of Nephrology***
- **Dialysis Clinic, Inc.'s Concurrent Care Program**

Faculty Spotlight

Sarah M. Belcher, PhD, is an assistant professor in the School of Nursing at the University of Pittsburgh.

Since earning her PhD in 2018, Dr. Belcher has built the science to inform clinical practice and develop novel approaches to define and support equitable patient adherence to oral anticancer medications (OAM). Her research as a National Institute of Nursing Research K23 (K23NR019296) awardee examined relationships among OAM adherence, financial hardship, symptoms, and quality of life among patients with multiple myeloma. It led to a recently funded National Cancer Institute R01 (R01CA292925) project titled, *Identifying Multi-Level Predictors and Outcomes of Oral Anticancer Medication Adherence Initiation and Persistence among Patients with Hematologic Malignancies*."

Dr. Belcher was supported as a promising scholar in cancer research through NCI's extramural loan repayment program for clinical researchers. She was named the 2024 UPMC Hillman Cancer Center Emerging Scholar awardee for meritorious population science cancer research. Her interdisciplinary research addresses inequities in OAM adherence, generating actionable strategies to improve medication adherence, enhance quality of life, and promote equitable care for patients with cancer and other chronic diseases, particularly among underserved populations.

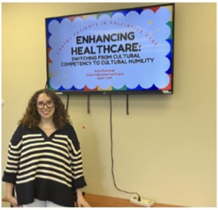
View **Dr. Belcher's bibliography** and follow her on X @SarahMBelcher.

Training and Education

Hospice and Palliative Medicine Fellowship

Current participants in our **Hospice and Palliative Medicine Fellowship** are:

- Jennifer Denike, MD.
- Sean Doerfler, MD.
- Aditi Jain, MD.
- Reed Nerness, MD.
- Gregg Robbins-Welty, MD.


LGBTQ+ PATIENTS IN PALLIATIVE CARE
ENHANCING HEALTHCARE:
SWITCHING FROM CULTURAL COMPETENCY TO CULTURAL HUMILITY

Amdur Fellowship

The Amdur Fellowship in Palliative Care provides an intensive, one-month internship in palliative care social work under the guidance of our palliative care programs at UPMC Shadyside and Presbyterian hospitals and the Family Hospice inpatient unit. It is designed for University of Pittsburgh Master of Social Work students considering professional specialization in palliative care.

We were honored to host Annie Sharbaugh as our 2024 Amdur fellow. Amy Drangines, LCSW, UPMC Shadyside, described it as a great opportunity to enable a new social worker to experience the wonderful work we do every day.

Annie expressed that she was honored to be the 2024 recipient of the Amdur Fellowship. She gained deep insights into the workings of integrated palliative health care. She also formed meaningful connections with the interdisciplinary teams who are genuinely dedicated to caring for patients and their families.

We are grateful to the UPMC Shadyside and UPMC Presbyterian palliative care teams and Family Hospice, part of UPMC, for the time and support dedicated to making this such a meaningful experience.

September PET Day

We had a successful PSI Palliative Education and Training (PET) Day in September. More than 50 PSI team members came together for networking and learning.

Speakers discussed a variety of topics, including demoralization, caring for LGBTQ+ patients and families, assessment and management of nausea, and ethics for the palliative care clinician.

Save the date for the 2025 PET days: April 22 and Sept. 16.

Quarterly Medical Education Faculty Development Session

We developed a quarterly interactive series to help medical educators further their skills. In October, the group met to discuss teaching in a hybrid environment (having both learners in person and virtually simultaneously). Natalie Stokes, MD, medical educator and associate program director, University of Pittsburgh Cardiovascular Fellowship Training Program, discussed her research on maximizing engagement in the hybrid learning space.

Diversity and Inclusion

Narratives of Inequity

Ashley Reasey, DMSc, and Becca Hoelsken, CRNP, came together with a mutual passion to provide a safe, open forum for discussion on racism, diversity, and social equity regarding work in health care. The series was born from Ashley's and Becca's professional and personal experiences surrounding racism and social inequities.

Each session in the series begins with a short lecture, followed by an open discussion in smaller breakout groups. It then returns to the larger group, where participants share their personal experiences and thoughts. The second half of each session is a narrative medicine exercise that involves close listening to a spoken word, reflecting on a piece of art, and/or a writing prompt.

Why this forum? Ashley and Becca found that many DEI trainings lack opportunities for reflection and safe, open, confidential discussion. By combining lecture-based learning and discussion with narratives, participants may be able to see the inequities their patients face, be more empathetic, and feel more comfortable engaging in conversations regarding racism. Ashley and Becca aim to create a forum where solutions for these disparities may be formulated and launched to improve cultural humility.

Participants are encouraged to attend all sessions because this work takes time and commitment, but it is not mandatory. Please look forward to these sessions resuming in 2025!

Welcome New Team Members

- Natalie Barr, BSN, RN — Palliative RN Navigator
- Kaitlyn Lersch, PA-C — TelliPalliative Care.
- Melissa McFadden, CRNP — Float, Oakland.
- Jillian Stephey, PA-C — Float, Oakland.

Awards and Recognitions

Congratulations

Amar Bansal, MD, received the 2024 Excellence in Patient Experience Award. His patients rated him as a top UPMC physician in renal/nephrology. Only 46 out of more than 5,000 UPMC physicians receive this award.

Karl Bezak, MD, was selected as a Doximity Digital Health Fellow for 2025.

Julie Childers, MD, received the 2024 Robert Arnold Excellence in Teaching and Mentoring Award, Allegheny County Medical Society's Richard E. Deitrick Humanity in Medicine Award, and the UPMC Senior Physician Excellence in Clinical Care award.

Kelly Harris, MD, was designated a UPMC Beckwith Shared Decision-Making Fellow for 2024 to 2026.

Maria Lowry, PharmD, was among the group who received the Medical Director's Award presented at the UPMC Western Behavioral Health Quality Fair.

Jessica Merlin, MD, received the 2024 Outstanding Research Mentor Award for Population Science Research Mentorship from UPMC Hillman Cancer Center.

Andrew Thurston, MD, was appointed as a member of the Academy of Distinguished Medical Educators and bestowed the "Mission of Mercy" Award.

He was nominated by multiple physicians for embodying the mission of mercy (compassion, empathy, mercy, reverence, integrity). The UPMC Mercy team attended the presentation during Mercy Day, which was created when UPMC Mercy was founded to recognize the incredible work being done at the hospital. He was one of only three physicians recognized during the ceremony.

Richard Weinberg, MD, was recently promoted to clinical professor of medicine.

Ashley Wills, CRNP, received the first UPMC OAPP Preceptor Academy Award of Excellence. This is a peer-nominated award for an advanced practice provider preceptor within the Preceptor Academy who exemplifies what it means to be a preceptor and educator at UPMC.

Grant Awards

- Maria Lowry, PharmD, received $5,000 for 2024-2025 from the Shadyside Hospital Foundation for her project *Meds After Beds*. The grant will fund medication adherence toolkits for our patients.

- Palliative care received $10,000 from the UPMC Physician Thrive Grants for Change Award for its project, *Improving Provider Wellness Through Billing Support and Efficient Practices*.
- The Shadyside team received $15,000 for 2024-2025 from the Shadyside Hospital Foundation for their Legacy Project.

Presentations

- Yael Schenker, MD, presented the 2024 Harold Wade Memorial Lecture at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth. Dr. Schenker's lecture was titled *Spreading the Wealth: Opportunities to Expand the Reach and Impact of Palliative Care*.
- Teresa Hagan Thomas, PhD, presented at the 2024 McGill International Palliative Care Congress in Montreal, Canada. Dr. Thomas' presentation was titled *Supporting Individuals with Advanced Cancer in Advocating for Their Needs and Priorities: What Clinicians, Caregivers, and Researchers Need to Know*.

Publications and Media

- **Jessica Merlin, Devon K Check, Katie F Jones, et al, *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, Misuse of Prescribed and Nonprescribed Substances Among U.S. Cancer Survivors.**
- **Gina Piscitello, Jane O Schell, Robert M Arnold, Yael Schenker, *BJM Supportive and Palliative Care*, Artificial Intelligence for Better Goals of Care Documentation.**
- **Margaret Rosenzweig, Sarah Marie Belcher, et al, *Oncology Nursing Society*, Research Priorities of the Oncology Nursing Society: 2024-2027.**
- **Yael Schenker, Robert M Arnold, et al, *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, Palliative Care Consults for Clinician Distress: Part of the Job?**
- **Douglas White, et al, *New England Journal of Medicine*, Navigating Clinicians' Conscience-Based Refusals to Provide Lawful Medical Care.**
- Teresa Hagan Thomas, PhD, was interviewed on the *Journal of Clinical Oncology's JCO Cancer Stories* podcast. Dr. Thomas discussed her *Journal of Clinical Oncology* article, ***Three Days Was Enough***.

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