

# Spine Tumor News

Making Cancer History®

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS  
**MD Anderson**  
~~Cancer~~ Center

*Our mission is to provide support and education to patients, families, caregivers and friends of individuals with spine tumors.*

## EVENTS

### SAVE THE DATE

5th Annual Spine Tumor Patient Education Conference

**Friday, August 15, 2014**

11th Floor - Clark Clinic  
MD Anderson Cancer Center  
Houston, Texas

### Spine Tumor Support Group Meetings:

**First Wednesday Every Other Month**

**5 p.m. - 7 p.m.**

Spine Tumor Support Group  
Place of Wellness  
Mays Clinic ACB  
Room 2.1041

### Future Meetings:

June  
August  
October



May 2014

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## Still Pursuing my Dreams even after Osteosarcoma

*By Jose Rodriguez, M.D.*

In 2007, after completing a medical career in Venezuela, I came to live in Spain to study gastroenterology. At the start of general surgery residency, I began to have pain in my back. I connected it to the long hours I spent as a resident in the operating rooms and to the many night shifts. I did not give it much thought because I was fascinated with my work.

When I returned home to Venezuela, my mother, a radiation oncologist, scheduled some diagnostic tests. We were both surprised by the abnormality in my spine. We prematurely concluded this was a "benign tumor" and that it would be uncomplicated and treated quickly. But then we received the biopsy results, which confirmed the tumor was a malignant osteosarcoma.

At that moment everything in my life changed, and I realized that my hopes, dreams, and plans of becoming a surgeon depended on the outcome of my illness. It all became very complicated, and the worst was the fear of what was to come. It was clear from that point on, I was no longer a surgical resident, but a patient seeking information and making decisions about my own treatment.

My identity changed from that of a doctor to a patient. I worked on developing a sense of partnership and trust in my medical team, knowing they were going to do their best for me.

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*The story of Jose Rodriguez continued from page 1*

I received my first chemotherapy in Caracas, Venezuela. At the completion of my chemotherapy, my medical oncologist in Venezuela recommended I seek the opinion of a surgeon with experience in complicated spinal cases, preferably with experience in sarcomas. An extensive internet search led me to MD Anderson Cancer Center. At the consultation with neurosurgeon Dr. Laurence Rhines, I immediately knew this was the place I needed to be. After an extensive consultation and a long discussion about the surgery, I realized there were medical and financial hurdles I was about to face. I was faced with an extremely complex surgery which was to be performed in three stages, the risks of paralysis and, the financial cost of the surgery and medical care.

My mother's relentless determination and great optimism led us to PDVSA, a Venezuelan state-owned oil and natural gas company who, in conjunction with CITGO, founded The Simon Bolivar Foundation, a nonprofit private foundation who provides financial assistance to individuals with challenging diseases and who are unable to receive medical care in their home countries. I am eternally grateful for their continued financial support and for helping my family and I overcome one of the many challenging hurdles this diagnosis brings. I am also forever grateful to my family, who during my treatment and at each visit provides me with an overwhelming sense of support.

One of the most difficult experiences was undergoing all of the diagnostic tests in order to determine if the surgery would ultimately be performed with the goals of a cure (curative intent) or to relieve my pain (palliative intent). These were my toughest days. I cried daily, but God was with me through it all, and ultimately the surgery was performed with a curative intent.

At every clinic visit, I began to realize the human quality of Dr. Rhines and his advanced practice nurse Gisela. Their professionalism, outward passion for their work, the time they devoted to me and their words of encouragement all provided me a sense of reassurance.

I underwent three surgeries and was hospitalized at least two weeks, but my recovery was surprisingly quick. I attended physical and occupational therapy, and remained at MD Anderson for about one year to receive additional chemotherapy. I am a very active person and it was difficult to dedicate all of my time to the treatment, but I focused on completing the therapy and looking towards the future. In retrospect, the time went quickly. Today, I am living essentially a normal life, and my dream of being a surgeon.

Being a patient is not easy, and like many other things in life, you can't really understand an experience until you have lived it yourself. My experience as a patient has made me see my patients in an entirely different light. Now I feel a much stronger connection with patients, and I do not hesitate to offer them support.

I also see life from a different perspective. I have learned to enjoy every moment, always seeing the bright side. It is amazing how from the time of diagnosis, I began to value each situation. No longer do I take things for granted and, no matter how "normal" an action is. I think now I value people differently, and I learned that the most important thing in life is spending time with the people you love.

*-- Jose Rodriguez*

# MD Anderson Educator of the Quarter



In recognition of her tireless efforts to educate and support our Spine Tumor patients, Gisela Sanchez-Williams has been selected as the Educator of the Quarter by the Education Resources Committee at MD Anderson. This award is given to those individuals who demonstrate excellence and innovative practices in education. The Educator of the Quarter is eligible for the Educator of the Year award which is announced in the Spring.

Gisela Sanchez-Williams, an advanced practice nurse in Neurosurgery, has cared for patients with many different types of cancers throughout her career. She's found empowering the patient is important regardless of the cancer type.

Sanchez has been at MD Anderson for 24 years, including eight years as a research nurse in Leukemia and seven years as an advanced practice nurse in Thoracic Head and Neck Surgery.

Sanchez joined Neurosurgery in 2006. In this new area she had to learn her patients' needs, one of which was how difficult it can be for a patient to process so much information. She created a survey to learn more about her patients' experiences. Using what she learned, Sanchez developed the Spine Tumor Support Group that has been meeting for three years. She also created a quarterly newsletter for spine tumor patients. Furthermore, Sanchez helped develop the Annual Spine Tumor Patient Education Conference, now in its fifth year.

"The conference is the highlight of the year for me because it brings the patients and multidisciplinary caregivers together for a hands-on learning experience. This is a day where patients can share their experiences and I've learned a lot about their quality of life concerns here," Sanchez says. "Having that personal education time with patients, where patients teach me in return, is very special."

## 5th Annual Spine Tumor Conference

Each year we grow from our experiences focusing on new approaches, surgical techniques, and exploring resources with the goal of taking the spine tumor practice, surgical outcomes, and the patients' quality of life to the next level.

This year's conference will offer a myriad of topics addressing innovative surgical techniques such as minimally invasive spine tumor surgery by Dr. Claudio Tatsui, Osteoporosis in the Spine Tumor Patient: Challenges in Treatment and Management by Dr. Beatrice Edwards, and Rebuilding the Spine:

Reconstruction and Stabilization by Dr. Laurence Rhines.

Whether you have just been diagnosed with a spinal tumor, completed treatment, or are caring for a loved one with a spinal tumor, this conference offers topics of interest you surely don't want to miss.

### **Expert Physician Panel:**

The conference offers a unique opportunity for patients to address questions to an "Expert Physician Panel," comprised of a highly specialized group of physicians who are dedicated to the care and treatment of spinal

tumor patients.

The areas of expertise include spinal surgery, radiation, physical therapy, and plastic surgery.

### **Round Table and Group Sessions**

Along with our speakers and physician panel, there will also be small group round table sessions where patients can discuss quality-of-life issues, and a larger group session where patients and caregivers can learn to relieve stress and stretch their muscles by combining music and movement.

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Other sessions which will be moderated by topic experts include:

- Spinal tumors and sexuality
- Coping strategies for couples dealing with a spinal tumor diagnosis
- Bowel and bladder management
- Developing a stress management tool kit
- Living with Chordoma: Patients' real life experiences with treatment

### ***Network with Physicians and Patients***

The conference offers spine tumor patients a chance to not only network with the doctors who treat spinal tumors, but with other patients who have physically and emotionally

experienced what it means to live with a spinal tumor. It offers an opportunity for face-to-face contact, the human connection, inspiration, realization, and knowing that you are alone.

### ***Exhibit Hall***

Ever wonder what spine instrumentation looks or feels like? How it is placed in your back? How a head and neck therapist can help a cervical spine patient improve swallowing or range of motion? Our exhibitors' hall gives participants the opportunity to get answers to all of these questions and more!

### ***Patient Story***

Each year a patient shares his/her spinal tumor journey, how he/she faced being diagnosed with

a spinal tumor, and how it has changed his/her life.

This year Elton Pollock, 14 year survivor of genitourinary sarcoma with metastasis to the spine, will discuss his proactive approach to fighting cancer. Mr. Pollock will take us through his remarkable journey, emphasizing how he utilized exercise, nutrition, activity, a positive attitude, and a partnership with his medical team, to help him be the best he could be for the next round in the fight against cancer.

Join us on **August 15, 2014 at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas** for an opportunity of a lifetime!

*-- Gisela*

## **What's Happening?**

### ***News from the Brain and Spine Center***



**Sherise Ferguson, MD**  
**Joins Neurosurgery Faculty**

Dr. Ferguson earned her medical degree from the University of Chicago, Pritzker School of Medicine. She completed a residency in neurosurgery at the University of Chicago. During her residency, she completed an NIH sponsored postdoctoral research fellowship in neuro-oncology and an enfolded fellowship in neurosurgical oncology at MD Anderson Cancer Center. Dr. Ferguson is a member of the American Association of

Neurological Surgeons, the Congress of Neurological Surgeons, the American Academy of Neurology and the Alpha Omega Alpha medical honor society. She has received numerous awards and honors, including Outstanding Consultant to the Emergency Department at the University of Chicago Hospitals. Her clinical interests include primary and metastatic brain tumors, pituitary tumors, and primary and metastatic spinal tumors.

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