

A Publication of  
**ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON  
UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL**

Fall 2021

# healthy *together*

**BREAKING  
VACCINE  
BARRIERS**

**BACK-TO-SCHOOL  
HEALTH:  
EXPERT TIPS**

**HIGH-TECH  
CARDIAC  
CARE**

**CANCER CARE:  
A NEW VISION**



# Investing in the Future

As New Jersey's most comprehensive academic health system, RWJBarnabas Health serves more than 3 million patients each year. You depend on us for the highest quality of care, and you count on us to keep pace with your evolving needs. That's why, as indicated by our many national awards, we never stop moving forward, as you'll see in this issue.

For example, in New Brunswick, we recently broke ground on the state's first freestanding cancer hospital, which will feature a comprehensive range of patient services as well as advanced research laboratories. Earlier this year, we debuted Braven Advantage, a new Medicare Advantage plan that offers unprecedented choice for New Jersey residents.

And, in keeping with our robust commitment to improve the health of our communities, we're supporting the creation of soccer fields in urban settings. These fields are transforming neighborhoods and lives as they provide new opportunities for children and adults alike to be healthy and active.

Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital is proud to be named among the best in the New York metropolitan area in the *U.S. News & World Report* 2021-22 Best Hospitals rankings for the 10th consecutive year. We received *U.S. News's* highest national award in eight Adult Conditions and Procedures as well as a "High Performing" rating in Gastroenterology and GI Surgery. We are building on our ability to deliver the highest quality of care with our new, state-of-the-art Surgical Services Suite and expand programs and services to meet the evolving healthcare needs of the diverse communities we serve.

Whatever the future brings for New Jersey, you can count on RWJBarnabas Health to be there for your healthcare needs, both inside and outside the hospital walls.

Yours in good health,

**BARRY H. OSTROWSKY**  
PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER  
RWJBARNABAS HEALTH



**BILL ARNOLD**  
PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER  
ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL



## HEALTH NEWS

### U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT: RWJUH AMONG THE AREA'S BEST



Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) has been recognized as a Regional Best Hospital for 2021-22 by *U.S. News & World Report* with "High Performing" badges in eight Adult Conditions and Procedures—the highest rating possible from *U.S. News*—and a "High Performing" Specialty badge in Gastroenterology and GI Surgery.

"To be recognized with the highest national rating based on quality and outcomes data for the care we provide for serious conditions affecting our communities is an honor and truly validates the RWJUH team's commitment to exceptional patient care," said Bill Arnold, President and Chief Executive Officer of RWJUH.

### SIXTH CONSECUTIVE MAGNET DESIGNATION



RWJUH has achieved Magnet® recognition for nursing excellence from the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) for the sixth consecutive time. RWJUH is one of only seven organizations internationally to achieve this distinction, placing it among an elite group of healthcare providers that belong to the Magnet community. Approximately 9 percent of hospitals in the nation have achieved Magnet recognition.

### JOINT COMMISSION AWARDS SECOND GOLD SEAL OF APPROVAL FOR BARIATRIC SURGERY



RWJUH has earned its second consecutive Gold Seal of Approval® for its Bariatric Surgery Program by demonstrating compliance with The Joint Commission (TJC) national standards for healthcare quality and safety in disease-specific care. The certification award recognizes RWJUH's dedication to continuous compliance with TJC's state-of-the-art standards.

RWJUH is the only organization in New Jersey to have received this designation for bariatric surgery and is one of only seven in the nation to earn the certification from TJC for its dedication to quality and safety.

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# A TRANSGENDER JOURNEY

PROVIDING COORDINATED PRIMARY AND  
SPECIALIZED CARE TO THE LGBTQIA COMMUNITY.

**G**wyndolin Vail was a student at Rutgers University in 2014 when the transitioning process began. “I had a kind of laissez-faire approach to gender,” says Gwyndolin, now a 30-year-old researcher. “I identify as nonbinary, and that’s been consistent from the start.” The decision to transition to a

more feminine appearance was carefully weighed. “It turned out to be a great choice that really improved my quality of life,” Gwyndolin says. “It allowed me to explore gender in a very positive way because it gave me access to how I wanted to look in ways I didn’t think I could before.”

Transitioning also exposed Gwyndolin to more complicated interactions with society, including the healthcare system. “The LGBTQIA population has often been marginalized, persecuted, looked down upon and judged,” says Sameh Abdelaal, MD, Medical Director of the Babs Siperstein PROUD Center at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Somerset, which offers specialized

primary care services for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex and asexual community. “People often fear going for medical care or to the pharmacy because of personal challenges that can arise from not being accepted or being under threat of scrutiny and disapproval.”

“It’s daunting to put yourself into the care of doctors who are not necessarily trans focused, especially if they have preconceived notions of what it means to be transgender and what people are trying to achieve with their gender presentation,” says Gwyndolin, who prefers to be referred to with they/them pronouns rather than binary he/him or she/her. “That’s even more true for



SAMEH ABDELAAL, MD



JEREMY SINKIN, MD

Gwyndolin Vail recently underwent gender affirmation surgery at the PROUD Gender Center of New Jersey at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital.



surgeries. Do you have a doctor who really is going to listen to you and what you want or instead focus on what they think you want?”

### SAFE, COMFORTABLE CARE

Gwyndolin's transition process first entailed hormone therapy at Rutgers University Student Health, working with Melodee Lasky, MD, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Health and Wellness and a collaborative faculty member at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. Therapy included taking androgen blockers and estrogen. “That produced demasculinizing effects from the blockers and specialized effects from the

estrogen,” Gwyndolin says. After graduating, Gwyndolin sought ongoing hormone therapy somewhere that would feel accepting and comfortable. “An endocrinologist at Rutgers Student Health connected me with the Babs Siperstein PROUD Center,” Gwyndolin says.

“We offer comprehensive care to anyone who needs help,” Dr. Abdelaal says. “If they have health needs, our attitude is, ‘You’re a human being; please come in and make yourself comfortable.’” He says a less welcoming attitude increases risks that members of the LGBTQIA community might skip medical care or seek it from unqualified sources.

In the case of transgender patients, “you can obtain hormones on the street or online, and there’s a lot of misinformation about their use,” Dr. Abdelaal says. Hormone treatments affect people differently and each patient’s goals are unique, so regimens need to be tailored and customized. Welcoming all patients helps ensure that care is both safe and respectful, he says.

“Simple things like having the names and pronouns that you want right in your chart make you feel respected for who you are,” Gwyndolin says. “One of the biggest benefits of having LGBTQIA-focused healthcare is that patients feel included and respected and not made to feel they’re different or strange or subjected to invasive curiosity, which I’ve definitely felt at doctors’ offices before.”

### SURGICAL SOLUTIONS

Seven years after beginning the transition process, hormones had only gone so far and Gwyndolin continued to feel a sense of what’s known as gender dysphoria. “I was experiencing a disconnect between my identity and how my body looked,” Gwyndolin says. They made an appointment to discuss breast augmentation surgery through the PROUD Gender Center of New Jersey

at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH), which offers a suite of specialized services to the LGBTQIA community, including gender affirmation surgery.

“The goal of gender affirming surgery is to align a person’s physical body with their identified gender,” says Jeremy Sinkin, MD, a plastic and reconstructive surgeon at RWJUH and Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. “During the surgical consultation to achieve a feminine chest, the surgeon needs to understand what the patient’s goals are for size and aesthetics. We need to agree on what implant sizes are medically appropriate for the patient’s body. It’s a shared decision-making process between patient and surgeon.”

Dr. Sinkin and Gwyndolin met multiple times to discuss goals and options. “I just wanted a little increase in breast size,” Gwyndolin says. “I wanted them to look natural and didn’t want a hyperfeminine body that was out of sync with my nonbinary identity or would impede an androgynous aesthetic.”

The process also entails emotional support, especially from patient navigators such as Jackie Baras, MSN, MBA, RN, and Daniel Fernandez. “Gender affirming surgery is a big change, and there’s a lot to process emotionally,” Gwyndolin says. “I have a good support network in my personal life, but for them to offer support, especially post-op, was unexpected and really nice.” Patient navigator Danielle King, MPH, similarly offers support and guidance on appropriate resources and care at the Babs Siperstein PROUD Center.

During Gwyndolin’s May 2021 surgery, Dr. Sinkin made a small incision under the fold of each breast and placed small implants under muscle and native breast tissue. “The outcome has been great and I’m very, very happy,” Gwyndolin says. “When I look at my body now, it feels like this is how I’ve always been, which is pretty incredible. It just feels natural.”

To learn more about the PROUD Gender Center of New Jersey at RWJUH, call **833.247.7683** or visit **[www.rwjbh.org/rwjhproudgendercenter](http://www.rwjbh.org/rwjhproudgendercenter)**.



Briana Hernandez can go about her studies at Rutgers University without fearing a brain hemorrhage, thanks to Gamma Knife surgery.

# RAYS OF

# HOPE

**CUTTING-EDGE RADIATION TREATMENT HELPS A YOUNG WOMAN OVERCOME A BRAIN CONDITION.**

The teenage years are a time of excitement but also of stress, both academic and social. Briana Hernandez of North Bergen in Hudson County faced another challenge



**JOSEPH WEINER, MD**

as well: fierce migraines that began when she was 15. “I started seeing blurry vision, light would bother me, and I would always be in bed,” the now 20-year-old recalls. Soon, the

excruciating episodes were occurring almost daily.

After six months, Briana and her mother, Libertad, decided to get to the root of the problem. Briana saw a local neurologist who examined her using a variety of imaging tests. The results were startling: She had an arteriovenous malformation, or AVM, deep in the right frontal lobe of her brain.

An AVM, she learned, is an abnormal tangle of blood vessels. It occurs between arteries, which take oxygenated blood to the heart and brain, and veins, which transport deoxygenated blood back to the lungs and heart. By connecting the arteries and veins, an AVM keeps them from functioning properly, sometimes depriving surrounding tissues of oxygen. The intertwined blood vessels can also rupture, and if the AVM is located in the brain, as Briana's was, it can cause a brain hemorrhage, brain damage or stroke.

"It was shocking, because I had never heard of this," Briana says. "You think, 'Is that really in me?' It was tough knowing that." She pondered where to get treatment. "My primary physician referred us to Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital [RWJUH] in New Brunswick because it's one of the best hospitals in New Jersey," Briana says.

### NONINVASIVE OPTION

Through an online search, Libertad found the Gamma Knife Center at RWJUH. After examining Briana, doctors there recommended against an open brain surgery because it carried a high risk for permanent weakness and stroke. Instead, they suggested a noninvasive approach: Gamma Knife therapy. Despite its name, it involves no incisions. Instead, it uses finely targeted radiation to treat AVMs and other brain abnormalities.

The results would be less immediate than surgery.

"That's the beauty of the technology;

Gamma Knife radiosurgery allows for curative outcomes in appropriately selected AVM, all without the need for open surgery and the associated risks and healing that come with that type of treatment," says Joseph Weiner, MD, a radiation oncologist at RWJUH and Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey, the state's only National Cancer Institute-Designated Comprehensive Cancer Center.

After thinking it over, Briana decided it was the best option for her. Still, she had misgivings: "I was terrified, to be honest," she says.

At the Gamma Knife Center, Briana was under the care of Dr. Weiner, who operated the Gamma Knife machine, and neuroradiologist Sudipta (Sid) Roychowdhury, MD, who performed an angiogram, an imaging test that would show Briana's blood vessels, organs and heart chambers.

### ONCE AND DONE

On the morning of her treatment, Briana lay faceup on a special table and her head was fixed in a frame to hold it still. The table was then slid into the round opening of the Gamma Knife machine. For the next hour and a half, invisible beams of radiation passed through Briana's head to her AVM. The machine made no loud noises, so the experience was relatively comfortable. And then, with no dramatic finale, the therapy ended after just one treatment. Briana was free to go home immediately afterward. "I felt fine but very tired," she says.

Doctors carefully tracked Briana's AVM every six months via MRI scans. She also underwent angiograms at the one- and two-year marks. Two years after having the procedure, Briana's last angiogram showed almost complete disappearance of the malformation.

For Briana, who is now enrolled at Rutgers University majoring in public health and minoring in public health administration, the news has given



## THE GAMMA KNIFE CENTER AT RWJUH

Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) is proud to offer access to the Gamma Knife Icon, the world's most advanced noninvasive radiosurgery technology. This device is specifically designed to treat many brain conditions, including cancer, benign tumors, vascular anomalies, movement disorders and pain syndromes. Gamma Knife technology is the most accepted and widely used radiosurgery platform worldwide.

The Gamma Knife Center at RWJUH is designed to house the latest Gamma Knife technology, with a special focus on patient convenience and comfort. The facility is located on the hospital campus at 10 Plum Street, New Brunswick, first floor. Free parking is provided in a parking garage attached to the facility.

her a feeling of freedom. "Honestly, I feel alive," she says. "I feel like I can do anything. I'm not scared of anything, and I feel good. It's good living life without worrying if something bad is going to happen."

Although doctors still see Briana periodically, she has almost been given a clean bill of health.

Dr. Weiner adds, "Briana is the reason why Gamma Knife radiosurgery exists. A young, healthy patient who presents with a potentially life-threatening diagnosis was able to be successfully treated with minimal impact on her life. Now years after treatment, and with clear improvement, she is able to go about her daily life without the fear of brain hemorrhage."

To learn more about arteriovenous malformation treatment using the Gamma Knife at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, visit [www.rwjbh.org/rwjuhavmtreatment](http://www.rwjbh.org/rwjuhavmtreatment).





# BACK-TO-SCHOOL PROTECTION PRIMER

## HOW TO GUARD CHILDREN AGAINST INFECTIOUS ILLNESSES.

With the lifting of certain COVID-19 restrictions that hindered education over the past year, many children may be heading back to in-person school. But COVID and old problems like colds and flus have not disappeared—and could now grow worse as the air gets nippier and people spend more time indoors.

“Keep in mind that viruses are still circulating,” says Amisha Malhotra, MD, an infectious disease specialist at The Bristol-Myers Squibb Children’s Hospital at Robert Wood Johnson University



AMISHA MALHOTRA, MD

Hospital and Associate Professor of Pediatric Infectious Diseases at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. That means parents should continue guarding

against infection to keep kids healthy in classrooms this year, Dr. Malhotra says. These steps can help.



**Vaccinate eligible children.** Children who are able should get the COVID-19 vaccine to prevent outbreaks at school and at home.

“Children can contribute to transmission and get sick from COVID as well,” Dr. Malhotra says. “If we want to beat this virus and return to a normal life, we need to make sure a majority of the population is vaccinated—and that includes eligible kids.”

Some children who receive the vaccine may experience side effects such as arm soreness, muscle aches, headaches and low-grade fever for one to two days afterward, while other children may not experience symptoms at all. Either way, the risks of COVID-19 outweigh potential side effects, Dr. Malhotra says.



**Get the flu shot.** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend influenza shots for children over 6 months old. “We didn’t see a lot of flu last year because of COVID restrictions,” Dr. Malhotra says. But cases may surge as kids go back to school and people gather indoors. “We’re already seeing more viruses recirculating that we did not see last year,” Dr. Malhotra says.



**Teach good hygiene.** Along with being vaccinated, washing hands regularly and often is the best way to ward off COVID-19 and other viruses as the weather gets colder. “I’m a big proponent of hand hygiene,” Dr. Malhotra says. “COVID brought hygienic practices more to the surface, and kids got the message. Parents were stressing it at home, and we need to keep doing that.” Children should also avoid sharing items like water bottles and masks with other students, she says.



**Follow school recommendations.** Remind your child that this academic year might look different than when they last

went to classrooms. For example, schools might follow social distancing guidelines such as spacing desks farther apart and requiring teachers to wear masks. Educational institutions may recommend masks for children over 2 as well. “It is important to wear a mask when recommended and show children how to wear it appropriately,” Dr. Malhotra says. Your child’s mask should fit snugly from the bridge of the nose to below the chin without gapping.



**Find out your school’s plan—and make your own.** Learn your school’s

COVID-19 point person and the notification plan if someone at school gets sick with COVID. If you or your child are feeling ill or have a fever, notify your child’s school and stay home. “It may not be COVID, but regardless, it’s important to stay home and get better,” Dr. Malhotra says.

To schedule an appointment for a COVID-19 vaccine, visit [RWJBH.org/covid19vaccine](https://www.rwjbh.org/covid19vaccine).







# WHAT YOU MAY NOT KNOW ABOUT CHOLESTEROL

MANAGE THESE MOLECULES NOW FOR A BIG PAYOFF LATER IN LIFE.

**Y**ou probably know that cholesterol is a fat-like substance in the blood that can cling to the walls of arteries, leading to cardiovascular disease or stroke. And you know that controlling cholesterol involves eating right, exercising and taking medication as prescribed.

But because it takes years before a person really feels the effects of high cholesterol, you may not realize just how big an impact it will have on your future.

“Managing cholesterol is a way of investing in your health decades from now,” says David Feldman, MD, Section



DAVID FELDMAN, MD

Chief of Advanced Heart Failure and Transplantation at Newark Beth Israel Medical Center. “In my field, we take care of patients who have had acute heart attacks, or are in cardiogenic

shock, or who need a heart transplant. But many serious heart problems can be prevented through decades of maintaining healthy cholesterol levels.”

Here, Dr. Feldman clears up some common misunderstandings:

- **We need cholesterol.** “It’s the basic building block for all the male and female hormones in the body and helps enhance brain function,” he says. “That’s why the cholesterol levels in pregnant women shoot up; they need it to help create another life.”

- **It’s not all about the numbers.** We’re used to hearing that an overall cholesterol level above 200 is outside the healthy range, but Dr. Feldman says the thinking on that has evolved. “There are many variables—how much medication you can tolerate, what your genetic predisposition is, what level you’re starting from,” says Dr. Feldman. “In some cases, reducing cholesterol too far can be dangerous.” Your doctor can customize a target to best suit your



## PUMPKIN POWER

What does pumpkin have to do with reducing your risk of cardiovascular disease? More than you may think. “Pumpkin’s high in vitamins A, C and E, and as a consequence is related to decreasing inflammation in the body’s immune system. That means decreasing risk for heart disease and cancer,” says cardiologist David Feldman, MD. “Pumpkin has twice as much fiber, which helps lower cholesterol, as kale. And unlike many canned foods, canned pumpkin retains its nutritional value.”

individual situation.

- **Some foods are more equal than others when it comes to combating cholesterol.** “A niacin, or vitamin B3, supplement is especially helpful in lowering ‘bad’ LDL [low-density lipoprotein] levels, as are fish, flaxseed oil and foods with lots of fiber,” says Dr. Feldman. Consult your physician before adding any supplements to your diet.

- **A moderate amount of alcohol may help keep cholesterol low.** “Moderate’ means one drink a day for women, two for men. That’s defined as one beer, 1.5 ounces of liquor or 4 ounces of wine,” Dr. Feldman explains. “Also, you can’t skip Wednesday and Thursday and then have triple the amount on Friday—that’s not a healthy approach.”

- **Any amount of activity helps reduce cholesterol.** “It may not be realistic for you to run a few miles every day and lift weights every other day,” says Dr. Feldman. “You just have to work on yourself. If you’ve been sedentary and you get off the couch and go for a walk for 30 minutes every day, or even a few times per week, you’ll improve your life, keep your cholesterol and blood sugar down, feel better and have the potential to live longer.”

Whoever your heart beats for, our hearts beat for you. To connect with one of New Jersey’s top cardiac specialists, call **888.724.7123** or visit **www.rwjbh.org/heart**.





# HELPING SENIORS STAY HEALTHY

HOW THE ANNUAL WELLNESS VISIT CAN LEAD TO IMPROVED HEALTH ALL YEAR LONG

If you or a loved one has Medicare, one of its most important benefits is the annual wellness visit. This no-copay visit is not the same as an annual physical. Instead, it's a chance



JESSICA ISRAEL, MD

for you and your provider to create a personalized preventative plan to help you stay well and get any help you may need.

"The annual visit is my favorite visit to have with

patients because I really get a chance to talk to them and to hear about how they live every single day," says Jessica Israel, MD, Senior Vice President, Geriatrics and Palliative Care, for RWJBarnabas Health (RWJBH) and a member of RWJBarnabas Health Medical Group. "We touch on areas of the patient's life that might not come up otherwise."

The range of subjects covered is broad. "I ask about whether they have access to healthy foods and whether their teeth hurt when they chew," Dr. Israel says. "I ask about throw rugs in their home that might be a tripping hazard,

and whether they need safety bars in the shower. I ask if they have someone to call if they need help."

Patients shouldn't feel intimidated by these questions, but should welcome and even demand them. "You can never put too much value on what comes out of an honest conversation," Dr. Israel says.

## THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Dr. Israel's philosophy is shared by providers of geriatric care throughout the RWJBH system and RWJBarnabas Health Medical Group. RWJBH is a member of the Age-Friendly Health



## A MEDICARE ADVANTAGE PLAN FOR NEW JERSEY

Braven Health, a new Medicare Advantage offering, was created with New Jersey senior citizens in mind. A partnership between three New Jersey healthcare leaders—RWJBarnabas Health, Hackensack Meridian Health and Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey—Braven Health offers access to 51,000 in-network healthcare professionals and 82 in-network hospitals and healthcare facilities.

“Having a partnership between our medical system and Horizon together means that patients have a lot of choices in their network,” explains Jessica Israel, MD, a Braven Health Provider Council Member and Senior Vice President, Geriatrics and Palliative Care, for RWJBarnabas Health. “In addition, procedures and prescriptions get approved more quickly because we’re all working together with the goal of eliminating the hassle that can come with healthcare plans.”

Braven Health also helps patients focus on wellness by offering flexible benefits for a range of wellness activities, such as joining a gym, getting a mammogram, taking a fitness class and getting bars installed in the shower for safety.

Launched in January 2021, the plan is available for residents of Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Middlesex, Monmouth, Ocean, Passaic and Union counties. (The program is not available in Somerset and Mercer counties.) As of May 31 this year, Braven had a higher enrollment than any other Medicare Advantage plan in the eight counties it serves.

To learn about Medicare and Medicare Advantage programs, including Braven Health, visit [www.rwjbh.org/braven](http://www.rwjbh.org/braven).

System action community, an initiative spearheaded by the John A. Hartford Foundation, the American Hospital Association and the Catholic Health Association of the United States.

Being an Age-Friendly Health System means applying four evidence-based elements of high-quality care, known as the 4M Framework, to all older adults. “We apply the 4Ms—medications, mobility, mentation and what matters—to elder healthcare in all our hospitals as well as outpatient settings, including in the annual wellness visit,” Dr. Israel says.

“For example, elderly people are often taking multiple medications because they have more than one health condition. We’ll ask about all of them to be sure there are no negative interactions or side effects,” she explains. “We’ll ask about mobility—how much and how well they’re moving around and whether physical therapy or equipment is needed. We’ll talk about areas related to mentation, or the mind—are there any issues with anxiety or depression, or perhaps forgetfulness?”

Equally important, she says, is the “what matters” aspect of the conversation,

which covers patients’ goals for their healthcare and what they don’t want, as well as the importance of having an advance directive. “The ‘what matters’ talk will vary from patient to patient,” Dr. Israel says. “We have a saying in geriatrics: ‘If you’ve seen one 80-year-old, you’ve seen one 80-year-old.’ Each patient is different, and the art of medicine is getting to know your patients.”

Annual wellness visits are inevitably revealing, says Dr. Israel. “Each time, something comes up that I didn’t know about the patient,” she says. “Then, we can have the next discussion: ‘How can we make this better?’”

To learn more about senior healthcare and geriatric medicine at RWJBarnabas Health, visit [www.rwjbh.org/seniorhealth](http://www.rwjbh.org/seniorhealth).





# GAME ON!

RWJBARNABAS HEALTH  
HELPS BRING SOCCER  
FIELDS TO URBAN  
NEIGHBORHOODS.

Soccer is the most popular sport in the world—but for many kids in urban communities, there’s no good local place to play it.

Now there is for kids in Newark, New Brunswick and Hamilton. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Somerset-based Players Development Academy (PDA) created its Urban Initiative to bring soccer facilities and coaching to underserved communities across the nation. Thanks to strong partnerships with RWJBarnabas Health (RWJBH) and local communities, the initiative is up and running in New Jersey.

In May, Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Community Field opened at Kossuth Park in New Brunswick. In July, Newark Beth Israel Medical Center Community Field opened at the Marquis “Bo” Porter Sports Complex in Newark. Also in July, the RWJUH Hamilton Community Field opened at the Bromley Sports Complex in Hamilton Township. More fields will open across the state in the RWJBH service area this year and in 2022.

The fields are part of RWJBH’s commitment to enhance well-being in the communities it serves. “Our

mission, improving the health and lives of the people in our communities, is an audacious goal,” says Barry Ostrowsky, President and CEO of RWJBH. “In order to do that effectively, you have to have a team of people dedicated to big ideas, and you have to have similarly minded partners.”

In addition to providing funding to build the fields, RWJBH will provide off-the-field education in nutrition, wellness and sports performance. The PDA will run soccer clinics and other training sessions, and local recreation departments will manage the fields. Often, the fields serve as



Opposite page and above, local children and officials participated in field openings in urban neighborhoods in Newark, New Brunswick and Hamilton.

an anchor for further revitalization of a neighborhood or expansion of community sports facilities.

### A SOCCER OASIS

Each field is approximately 40' by 70', allowing for a scaled-down version of the game known as futsal. These relatively small areas make the most sense for urban settings and allow players to have more time on the ball. The fields are made of artificial turf, allowing for nearly year-round play.

“PDA has been an incredible partner as we create a home for soccer programs as well as community-member pickup games in underserved urban areas,” says Justin Edelman, Senior Vice President, Corporate Partnerships, at RWJBH. “The reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. You see such a wide range of people—friends, family, all ages—using the facilities.”

“This type of field is important for the community because it’s an oasis for

the game,” says Gerry McKeown, Boys Coaching Director, PDA. “The benefit of putting fields in these locations is that children can walk to them right in their neighborhood, and play or compete or just have fun, and fall in love with the game any way they would like. We’re bringing the best of the beautiful game to boys and girls that need our support. We hope this initiative sparks greater interest in the game, leading to more opportunities for kids from diverse backgrounds.”

To learn more about the Urban Initiative, visit [www.urbaninitiativepda.org](http://www.urbaninitiativepda.org). To learn more about RWJBarnabas Health social impact initiatives, visit [www.rwjbh.org/socialimpact](http://www.rwjbh.org/socialimpact).





RWJBarnabas Health, together with Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey—the state’s only NCI-Designated Comprehensive Cancer Center—provides close-to-home access to the latest treatment options. To learn more, call 844.CANCERNJ or visit [www.rwjbh.org/beatcancer](http://www.rwjbh.org/beatcancer).



# BUILDING THE FUTURE OF CANCER CARE

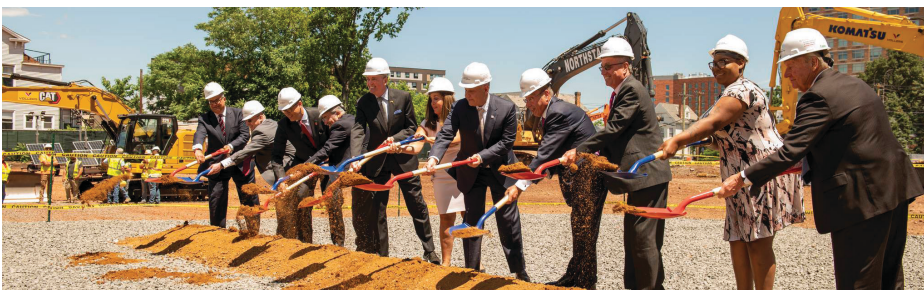
**A NEW CANCER HUB IN NEW BRUNSWICK WILL BE A MODEL FOR MULTIDISCIPLINARY CARE.**



It will soar 12 stories and cover 510,000 square feet. It will cost an estimated \$750 million and will be completed in 2024.

Most important, the Jack & Sheryl Morris Cancer Center, which broke ground in June, will transform cancer research and care throughout New Jersey and beyond. The state’s first and only freestanding cancer hospital is a joint venture of RWJBarnabas Health (RWJBH) and Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey, in partnership with the New Brunswick Development Corporation.

“The Jack & Sheryl Morris Cancer Center will be a model for cancer care delivery, bringing together the three mission areas of academic medicine—





Opposite page, renderings of the new center and scenes from the ceremonial groundbreaking. Above, left to right: cancer survivor Keosha Doyle, who was treated at Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey; Barry Ostrowsky, President and CEO, RWJBH, with Sheryl and Jack Morris and Steven K. Libutti, MD, Director, Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey and Senior Vice President of Oncology Services at RWJBH; Jack Morris delivers remarks at the event.

research, education and patient care—under one roof,” says Barry Ostrowsky, President and Chief Executive Officer, RWJBH.

### COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES

“The new cancer center brings together all the facets of research, prevention and clinical care that we drive and deliver into one location,” says Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey Director Steven K. Libutti, MD, who is also the Senior Vice President of Oncology Services at RWJBH.

The facility will have 10 state-of-the-art laboratories where teams of scientists will study cancer as a disease and develop new treatments. Many of the discoveries from these laboratories will be translated directly to the clinical setting at Rutgers Cancer Institute and across the RWJBH system.

“We will be bringing science from the bench to the patient’s bedside and back again,” says Dr. Libutti. “That means we’ll be able to further tailor patient treatments and collect important research data more rapidly and directly.”

Patients will be able to receive a wide range of both inpatient and outpatient cancer care in the new cancer center, including advanced imaging services as well as radiation and chemotherapy treatments.

The facility will have 96 inpatient beds, including an entire floor dedicated to surgical services.

Exam rooms have been designed so that a multidisciplinary team of specialists can see a patient in one location, rather than having the patient travel from doctor office to doctor office. Specially trained oncology nurse navigators will guide patients on their journey from diagnosis through survivorship.

Wellness, prevention and education resources, including a wellness garden, will be available for the community, patients, caregivers and families.

### A POWERFUL PARTNERSHIP

RWJBH and Rutgers Cancer Institute, the state’s only National Cancer Institute-Designated Comprehensive Cancer Center, have partnered to provide close-to-home access to the most advanced cancer care.

Cancer specialists throughout RWJBH collaborate with experts at Rutgers Cancer Institute to devise the best treatment plan for each patient, including clinical trials, immunotherapy and precision medicine. That means that a patient being treated for cancer at any RWJBH

hospital will have access to the treatment options and clinical expertise anywhere in the hospital system, as well as at Rutgers Cancer Institute.

“The new cancer center will be integrated into our multidisciplinary care paradigm, which is across the entire RWJBarnabas Health system,” says Dr. Libutti.

“We believe it is critically important that we have sites and facilities all across the state to bring cancer care as close to home as possible,” he says. “We also believe that we need one hub that allows us to bring the highest level of extremely specialized, multidisciplinary cancer care in the setting of groundbreaking research.”

The center is named in recognition of the philanthropic leadership of Jack Morris, who has been a longtime supporter and pillar in New Brunswick development, and his wife, Sheryl.

“People shouldn’t have to go all over the country to get great care,” says Jack Morris. “We’re doing it right here. It has been our vision, our hope and our dream to have the top cancer center in the nation here in New Brunswick. Sheryl and I are so proud that we can play a role in helping to make this dream a reality.”

To learn more about the Jack & Sheryl Morris Cancer Center, visit [www.cinj.org/jackandsherylmorriscancercenter](http://www.cinj.org/jackandsherylmorriscancercenter).



# CHRONIC DISEASE: A TEEN TAKES CONTROL

**A TEAM OF EXPERTS PROVIDES THE TOOLS NEEDED TO MANAGE TYPE 2 DIABETES.**

“I was so nervous when I first stepped into the hospital,” says Ariely Garcia. “I was so far away from home.”

Ariely was just 16 when she got a diagnosis of Type 2 diabetes, a chronic condition marked by high blood glucose levels that can result in major health complications. Often referred to as adult-onset diabetes, Type 2 can also develop during childhood as a result of improper nutrition and lack of exercise.

Although Type 2 diabetes can't be cured, it can be managed with healthy eating, medication and lifestyle changes. On her doctor's recommendation, Ariely had come to the Chronic Illness Management Program (CIMP) at Children's Specialized Hospital in New Brunswick to learn how to do just that.

## SKILLS AND STRATEGIES

Ariely worked with a variety of CIMP specialists in areas including recreational therapy, physical therapy,



Specialists at the Chronic Illness Management Program at Children's Specialized Hospital coached Ariely in nutrition, exercise and more to help her learn to live well with Type 2 diabetes.



**Children's Specialized Hospital®**

An RWJBarnabas Health facility

occupational therapy, nutrition education and psychology.

After four weeks in the program, Ariely felt confident that she could manage her diabetes. Her greatest fear: that she would “fall off the wagon” when she got back to her familiar home and school environment. And in fact, by the fall of that year, Ariely had stopped taking the medication she needed to help manage diabetes.

Recognizing that she needed help, she asked if she could go back to Children's Specialized Hospital. “I knew the program had everything I needed to take control of my diabetes again, and I knew that this time, I was ready,” she says.

At the beginning of 2021, Ariely re-entered CIMP. “This time, I was less nervous and was ready to get back on track,” she says. “I was on board with the hard work I needed to do.”

Her team was prepared with a plan that was customized to provide resources for her home environment. During her stay, Ariely strategized with the physical therapist on ways to stay active while at home, including the use of free smartphone apps and exercises that don't require equipment. She learned to grill chicken, make a kale salad and prepare a breakfast smoothie. She met with the psychology team to talk about stressors and learn to better communicate and cope with challenges. A certified diabetes educator talked with Ariely about the condition, with lessons culminating in “Jeopardy”-style games at the end of each week.

Ariely went home the day after her 18th birthday. “Now I really understand the effects diabetes has on me,” she says, “and I don't need to rely on anyone to do what I need to do to control it.”

For more information about Children's Specialized Hospital, call **888.244.5373** or visit [www.rwjbh.org/childrensspecialized](http://www.rwjbh.org/childrensspecialized).

At Children's Specialized Hospital, we provide world-class care for children and young adults who face special health challenges across the state of New Jersey and beyond. We treat everything from chronic illnesses and complex physical disabilities, like brain and spinal cord injuries, to a full scope of developmental, behavioral and mental health concerns.

We have convenient locations throughout the state: Bayonne, Clifton, East Brunswick, Egg Harbor Township, Hamilton, Jersey City, Mountainside, New Brunswick, Newark, Somerset, Toms River, Warren and West Orange.





# GROUNDBREAKING RELATIONSHIPS

Top right: Barry Ostrowsky, President and CEO, RWJBH, highlights the importance of investment in the community and education.

## COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS DRIVE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW SCHOOL AND CANCER CENTER.

Prior to the groundbreaking ceremony that marked the start of construction on the new state-of-the-art Jack and Sheryl Morris Cancer Center (see page 14), another groundbreaking event essential to the project's success took place for a different structure: the new Blanquita B. Valenti Community School.

The \$55 million, 125,000-square-foot school will replace New Brunswick's Lincoln Annex School, which stood at the site where the new Cancer Center is rising. That site adjoins existing facilities of Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital and Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey, the state's only National Cancer Institute-Designated Comprehensive Cancer Center. RWJBarnabas Health is partnering with Rutgers Cancer Institute and New Brunswick Development Corporation (DEVCO) to construct the Cancer Center, which will be the state's first freestanding cancer hospital.

DEVCO is also spearheading construction of the Valenti School,

slated to be completed in 2023. It will provide what New Brunswick Public Schools Superintendent Aubrey A. Johnson describes as "an exceptional, state-of-the-art educational facility." The new school is being erected on a 4.5-acre tract donated by Jack Morris, chairman of the Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Board of Directors.

### COMMUNITY EFFORT

The new school is named for community leader Blanquita B. Valenti, who, before her death in March 2021, had served on a variety of community boards and organizations, including the Board of Education and City Council.

"One of the beautiful things about this is that the city, the school district, DEVCO, the county and [RWJBarnabas] Health system [came] together to do something to transform the community," said Dr. Dale Caldwell, President, New Brunswick Board of Education, during the school groundbreaking ceremony.

Barry Ostrowsky, President and

CEO, RWJBarnabas Health, offered perspective on the interconnected school and Cancer Center construction projects in comments to the crowd at the school groundbreaking. "Clinical programs are imperative, facilities that house them are critically important," he said. "But if you don't invest in the community, if you don't invest in education, all the clinical programs in the world won't make the community healthier or happier."

James M. Cahill, Mayor of the City of New Brunswick, echoed those comments at the school groundbreaking. "One of the greatest gifts we can offer our young people is opportunity, and the opportunities offered by this modern, new school will set the stage for successes of our students for decades," Cahill said. "This new and exciting learning facility is reflective of the commitment of our community and all of those involved in making this school a reality to provide our children a nurturing environment and the opportunity to excel in their academic pursuits."

To learn more about Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital's commitment to community health, visit [www.rwjbh.org/treatment-care/community-health](http://www.rwjbh.org/treatment-care/community-health).





# HUB OF INNOVATION

TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED CARDIOVASCULAR SERVICE WILL DELIVER NEW MODELS OF CARE.

**R**obert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) treats high volumes of complex cardiothoracic conditions with the most advanced interventions available today. Now plans are under way for a digital transformation of cardiology services that will enhance all aspects of the patient journey by leveraging advanced technologies such as innovative devices, robotics and artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities.



**PARTHO SENGUPTA, MD**

Leading the effort is Partho Sengupta, MD, who in July joined RWJUH and Rutgers Robert

Wood Johnson Medical School (RWJMS) as the Henry Rutgers Professor of Cardiology and Chief of Cardiology, RWJMS, and Chief of Cardiology Service Line, RWJUH.

He will work closely with Anthony Altobelli, MD, Clinical Chief of Cardiology, RWJUH, and Mark Russo, MD, Chief of Cardiovascular and Thoracic Surgery, RWJUH, and Associate Professor of Surgery and Chief of the Division of Cardiac Surgery, RWJMS, to lead one of the largest cardiovascular and thoracic services in the region. Dr. Sengupta brings a passion for technology-enabled education and care, experience in building a robust network of cardiologists in the community and a vision for transformation and innovation in cardiology.

“We’re advancing the design of a technology and innovation hub where diverse people including RWJUH faculty, community physicians and staff can come together to create new ideas and designs for clinical care and technologies that help find solutions to healthcare challenges,” Dr. Sengupta says. He points to the rapid expansion of telemedicine during the COVID-19 pandemic as a familiar example of how technology can help solve vital problems. “It’s important to create a space and environment where we can find solutions with the right technology,” he says.

## DATA-DRIVEN INSIGHTS

In some cases, the right technology could take the form of innovative devices. For example, a handheld device known as a

pocket ultrasound can attach to a cell phone and deliver ultrasound images to the phone's screen. "In addition to using a stethoscope, you can see the heart directly on your phone," Dr. Sengupta says. "AI tools help navigate the process of taking the pictures."

AI allows analysis of vast quantities of data mined from sources such as medical images to find patterns that might otherwise go unnoticed. "Many of the technologies we'll be focusing on will have AI pipelines for developing solutions," Dr. Sengupta says. "You can train a system to discover hidden meanings in unstructured information."

AI is so important to the RWJUH and RWJMS cardiology innovation hub that Dr. Sengupta has brought on Naveena Yanamala, PhD, Associate Professor of Medicine, to direct data science and machine learning research. She joins another addition to the project, cardiologist Grace Casacang-Verzosa, MD, who will serve as Administrative Director, focusing on operations, work flow and quality.

AI capabilities are the foundation of a rapidly evolving field known as radiomics, which uses algorithms to analyze data from a variety of radiology images or scans. The field has largely developed in the arena of cancer care but is increasingly being used in cardiology.

"Radiomics has shown how using AI can provide information about features such as tissue texture that almost give you a sense of a biopsy without taking a sample of the tissue," Dr. Sengupta says. "When we apply that to cardiology, we can discover qualities such as whether a tissue is fibrotic, scarred or healthy."

AI can use such insights to make predictions. Dr. Sengupta and his team are working to further develop tools that can take data from imaging or even electrocardiograms (ECGs), along with clinical information, to forecast which patients are most likely to develop heart failure, for example. "AI allows us to use existing images and technology to



Cardiologist Grace Casacang-Verzosa, MD (left), and data science specialist Naveena Yanamala, PhD (right), have joined cardiologist Partho Sengupta, MD, in developing and adapting innovative cardiovascular technologies.

develop more accurate predictions of outcomes," Dr. Sengupta says. "These data-driven prediction models help us identify who needs early intervention and better individualize care."

Similar models can predict which hospitalized patients may need more intensive care and should stay longer and which are likely to do well if they are discharged. Dr. Sengupta's team is working with vendors to develop tools that may continually monitor patient ECGs at home. "We may be able to predict several hours ahead that someone is becoming sicker and needs to get back to the hospital," he says. "Use of such models needs to evolve, and that's where the innovation and technology hub comes in."

### MEETING OF MINDS

Further evolving these technologies through the innovation hub may entail working with vendors or conducting research to discover or develop concepts, hardware, systems and other types of intellectual property in a form of internal entrepreneurship. The

hub will also foster further education about established technologies such as telemedicine.

The vision of a technology-enabled cardiovascular service that optimizes patient health through new models of care promises a number of important benefits, Dr. Sengupta says. These include making better sense of data pertaining to patients, augmenting medical decision making, further standardizing care from one doctor to another and ultimately finding more time to spend with patients to provide high-quality care.

"This can't happen without a multidisciplinary approach," Dr. Sengupta says—another reason for a hub that brings together minds from a variety of specialties. "The field of cardiology technology is evolving very rapidly and becoming very exciting," he says. "There's energy and enthusiasm for taking a forward-looking approach both within Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and RWJBarnabas Health. We're positioning ourselves optimally to launch into the future."

Whoever your heart beats for, our hearts beat for you. To connect with a top cardiovascular specialist at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, call **888.724.7123** or visit **www.rwjbh.org/heart**.

# AN ADVANCE FOR CHILDREN

Colorful décor and child-friendly amenities will greet children and families as they enter the new pediatric infusion center at BMSCH.



## NEW PEDIATRIC INFUSION CENTER WILL SUPPORT STATE-OF-THE-ART BIOLOGIC THERAPIES.

The Bristol-Myers Squibb Children's Hospital (BMSCH) at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital has responded to major advances in therapeutics for children with plans for a new dedicated pediatric infusion center. A \$2.5 million commitment from the Bristol Myers Squibb Foundation will support the infusion center's planning and construction.

"We now have many biologic, injectable therapeutics for children, including immunomodulators that are being used for an increasing number of disorders affecting the immune system," says Sally Radovick, MD, Professor of Pediatrics, Chair of the Department of Pediatrics and Physician-in-Chief at BMSCH. "In some cases, these advanced treatments have become first-line therapies."

In addition to immunomodulators,

other forms of infusion therapies are being used to treat an increasingly wide range of both acute and chronic pediatric conditions. These include gastrointestinal disorders such as ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease, rheumatologic conditions such as juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, neurologic problems such as multiple sclerosis, antirejection therapy for kidney transplants and genetic, endocrine and blood disorders. "There's been an explosion of these therapies available for children, especially in the last few years," Dr. Radovick says.

"As biologic and drug therapies delivered through infusion in an outpatient setting become a growing part of pediatric healthcare, we need a state-of-the-art space dedicated to providing them that's both permanent and child-friendly," says William Faverzani, Vice President and Chief Administrative

Officer at BMSCH. "These new treatments promise to keep many children out of the hospital and offer them a better quality of life."

### A CHILD-FRIENDLY SETTING

Children and families entering the first-floor infusion center will likely first notice amenities such as colorful décor, toys and games, Wi-Fi capability and a variety of electronic diversions such as tablets, video games and TVs. Infusions will be delivered in private rooms. Furnishings will include reclining chairs that contribute to a relaxed atmosphere in which parents are able to stay with their children throughout treatment.

"Child-friendly amenities address the needs of children who may spend a few hours to even a full day receiving treatments," Faverzani says. "In everything we do at the children's hospital, a child

should still be able to be a child. Playing games and interacting with others are what they should be doing to learn and develop, and we want an environment that has activities and is engaging.”

Children also are more likely to benefit from treatments when they’re comfortable. “Coming into a fun environment for reasons that aren’t very fun is reassuring to a child and minimizes discomfort,” Dr. Radovick says.

### SPECIALIZED ATTENTION

Providing a dedicated space has clinical significance as well. In addition to infusions, the center will provide therapeutic injections, sedation for diagnostic tests such as MRIs that require a child to be completely still and provocative stimulation testing in which the response to an administered agent helps diagnose conditions such as growth hormone deficiency.

“These therapies require regimens that are focused on the child in terms of both comfort and safety,” Dr. Radovick says. “The pediatric infusion center will be staffed by pediatric specialists who focus only on children. We’ll have highly trained pediatric infusion nurses and nurse practitioners who are specially versed in putting an IV in a child, decreasing discomfort with tools such as numbing cream and responding to any side effects.” Pediatric physicians will be close at hand to assist with any unforeseen complications.

“We also have child life specialists who are specially trained in the developmental needs of children of all ages and work directly with patients to cope with what they’re going through,” Faverzani says. “We have one of the largest child life teams in the state. That’s a distinguishing feature of the pediatric infusion center and one of the things that make our children’s hospital special.”

Adding a pediatric infusion center is consistent with the mission envisioned for BMSCH when it was founded 20 years ago. “We adapt as pediatric healthcare evolves,” Faverzani says. “Creating a pediatric infusion center says that we are at the forefront of treatment modalities and continually update our facilities to meet the clinical needs of patients today.”



Representatives from The Bristol-Myers Squibb Children’s Hospital (BMSCH) at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital and the Bristol Myers Squibb Foundation gather to mark the Foundation’s commitment of \$2.5 million in support of BMSCH’s new pediatric infusion center.

## A HISTORY OF GENEROSITY

The Bristol Myers Squibb Foundation has a long legacy of significant financial support for The Bristol-Myers Squibb Children’s Hospital (BMSCH) at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital as well as broader support for Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) and RWJBarnabas Health (RWJBH). With the Foundation’s latest commitment of \$2.5 million to support creation of a pediatric infusion center, total giving is now more than \$20 million.

The long-term partnership between the Foundation and BMSCH dates to 20 years ago, when a \$5 million naming gift from the Foundation helped establish the children’s hospital. A close relationship has continued ever since.

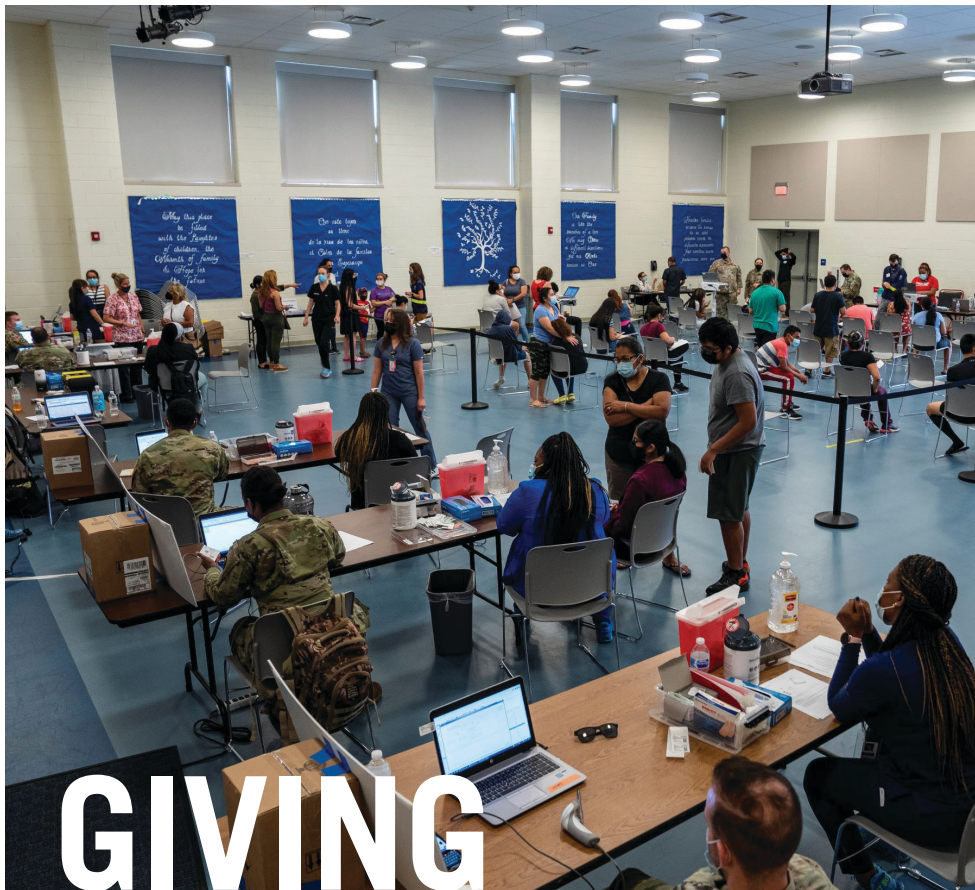
“Partnerships are all about relationships and staying the course,” says John Damonti, President of the Bristol Myers Squibb Foundation. “Putting up a building is a first step. But a building is nothing unless the best people, most caring staff and state-of-the-art capabilities are inside that building. As the children’s hospital has continued to grow and pediatric medicine has rapidly evolved, we have supported the hospital in providing world-class care and services to the children of New Jersey.”

### OPTIMAL CARE CLOSE TO HOME

Committing a \$2.5 million gift to support a pediatric infusion center is just the latest example. “The Foundation’s investment in the growth and development of BMSCH has included the addition of specialized centers, developing and supporting surgical expertise and attracting the best physicians,” Damonti says. “By providing optimal care for children in New Jersey so families don’t have to travel out of the area, we support our local community, including our own employees who live and work here.”

“The Bristol Myers Squibb Foundation has been a tremendous partner over the years, and their significant gift to enable building the pediatric infusion center is a testament to their commitment to children and belief in BMSCH’s ability to be the leader in pediatric healthcare in New Jersey,” says Bill Arnold, President and Chief Executive Officer of RWJUH. “We’re proud of our partnership and pleased that they join with us to give children the best care possible.”

To learn more about the comprehensive care provided at The Bristol-Myers Squibb Children’s Hospital at RWJUH, visit [www.rwjbh.org/bmsch](http://www.rwjbh.org/bmsch).



# GIVING VACCINATION A SHOT IN THE ARM

**COMMUNITY HEALTH TEAM MAKES A GRASSROOTS EFFORT TO OVERCOME INOCULATION HURDLES.**

False information about COVID-19 vaccination from coworkers and social media had left a young mother of two concerned: Would getting vaccinated make her infertile? Implant a tracking chip inside her? Trigger dangerous side effects?

Community health promoters from Robert Wood Johnson University

Hospital (RWJUH) stood ready with the facts. They spoke with the woman about her concerns, discussed the vaccine's benefits and side effects and dispelled misinformation. As a result, the woman got a shot to protect herself and the community against COVID.

Facing widespread vaccine hesitancy that was occurring for a variety of

reasons, a team of RWJUH community health specialists and volunteers have run a targeted, coordinated campaign to educate area residents about the COVID-19 vaccine and get more shots into arms.

The grassroots effort has overcome vaccination hurdles such as technology challenges, disinformation, demanding work schedules, language barriers and more. The dozen-strong group took to streets, churches, schools and the internet to convince New Brunswick-area residents that vaccination is the most powerful tool to end the pandemic.

"Our community health workers knocked on doors, listened at restaurants, churches and bodegas, answered questions and went through every misconception," says Mariam Merced, MA, Director of RWJUH Community Health Promotions. "That's helped turn things around in this city. We've helped people make their appointments and circumvented barriers to get them in."



Members of the RWJUH Community Health Promotions team (above) have provided accurate information, adapted timing of COVID-19 vaccination clinics and taken other steps to make shots more convenient and less stressful for area residents.

## A FUTURE IN FLUX

The COVID-19 pandemic drove home the lesson that preventing illness is far easier than coping after symptoms emerge. As cooler weather sets in and activities move indoors, the Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) Community Health Promotions team seeks to educate the community on reducing potential risks of infection.

Keeping focused on prevention is key, says RWJUH community health promoter Rosabel Pastrana. “Before the COVID vaccines were approved, the only thing we had was preventive steps such as wearing masks, washing hands and social distancing,” she says. “Whatever comes our way, we know these things can work.”

As the COVID-19 vaccine landscape has shifted, more younger Americans have become eligible for vaccination. “Parents who are considering vaccination for a child and still have questions or concerns should talk to their child’s pediatrician,” says Mariam Merced, MA, Director of Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Community Health Promotions. “A child’s doctor will have up-to-date, accurate information about the vaccines, their potential side effects in children and what studies have been done, which can help alleviate any fears.”

“We gave a face to the vaccine,” adds RWJUH community health promoter Rosabel Pastrana. “That builds trust and alleviates misgivings.”

### BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Even before COVID vaccines became widely available, RWJUH health promoters mobilized to educate community members. Key strategies included holding webinars and Facebook Live sessions (in English and Spanish), as well as creating videos with eligible community schoolchildren asking their parents to get vaccinated. “Kids want to go out and go back to playing in the park and getting together,” Merced says. “It’s been very hard for them to be cooped up.”

Campaign efforts concentrated on the city of New Brunswick, which Merced describes as one of the most vulnerable communities in the area due to low overall vaccination rates and large numbers of immigrants, many of whom speak English as a second language and have limited access to healthcare.

Specific challenges faced residents who lack tech skills—often older adults with little idea how to register online for a vaccine appointment—and workers

with demanding or erratic job schedules. RWJUH team members fanned out to offer hands-on help with sign-ups both on computer and in person, and adapted clinic hours to meet community needs. In addition to a vaccination clinic at RWJUH, smaller sites were established at local schools and churches that were easy to walk to and reassuringly familiar to residents.

“When you work in a factory or have two or three jobs, you don’t really have time to stop for a vaccine appointment,” Merced says. “So we set up nighttime, Saturday and Sunday clinics. On Sundays, we saw a lot of men come in and realized that’s the only day they could do it because they worked 7 to 7, six days a week.”

### RIPPLE EFFECTS

Once residents arrived to get their shots, the RWJUH team added thoughtful touches to make the experience easier and more pleasant. On-site interpreters ensured seamless communication.

Mood-boosters such as piped-in music, bottled water and ice cream helped soothe frazzled nerves. “We called it ‘Get a shot, get an ice cream,’ and people really enjoyed that,” Merced says. “It made waiting during the 15-minute observation period after getting a shot—when some recipients worried about side effects hitting—less scary.”

The vaccination campaign is ongoing, but Merced and Pastrana took great satisfaction in seeing an estimated 2,300 additional people vaccinated by midsummer due to RWJUH Community Health Promotions. They’ve also seen the team’s efforts trigger ripple effects: The young mother that Pastrana convinced to get a shot in turn eagerly looked forward to an opportunity to get her 10-year-old vaccinated once younger children became eligible.

Likewise, each decision to receive a vaccine helps encourage others to do the same. “We are at the forefront of making sure our community has the right information,” Merced says.

To learn more about signing up for COVID-19 vaccination, visit [www.rwjbh.org/vaccineregistration](http://www.rwjbh.org/vaccineregistration).



# Your family has no history of breast cancer. You still need a mammogram.

It's curious how healthy habits can become go-to excuses. But don't excuse yourself from getting a mammogram. At RWJBarnabas Health, we offer the latest in comprehensive breast health services including mammograms, 3D mammograms, genetic testing, breast surgery and more — like peace of mind. And with breast health centers conveniently located throughout New Jersey, finding us is simple, too.

Making excuses is easy. Making an appointment is easier.  
Schedule your visit at [rwjbh.org/mammo](http://rwjbh.org/mammo).

**Robert Wood Johnson  
University Hospital**

**RWJBarnabas  
HEALTH**

**RUTGERS**  
Cancer Institute  
of New Jersey  
**RUTGERS HEALTH**

**Let's beat breast cancer together.**

