



## PATIENT-CENTERED APPROACH OFFERS LATEST TREATMENTS FOR GYNECOLOGIC CANCERS

### KEY POINTS:

- Division of Gynecologic Oncology treated 135% more patients in 2013 than in 2006
- Specialists treat full spectrum of reproductive malignancies in women at UMGCC
- Uterine, ovarian and cervical cancers most common here
- Multidisciplinary tumor board meets weekly to create individualized approach to treatment
- Research efforts expanding, including studies on targeted drugs



A devastating diagnosis with deadly ovarian cancer recently brought a woman in her 40s to University of Maryland

and Stewart Greenebaum Cancer Center (UMGCC). With young children at home, the southern Maryland resident wasn't convinced the standard chemotherapy she'd received at her local hospital was enough to ensure that her cancer would go into remission — an ever-present possibility for advanced ovarian malignancies.

But after leading-edge treatment at UMGCC with intraperitoneal chemotherapy, which injects cancer-destroying drugs directly into the abdominal cavity, the patient has achieved complete remission. "It's a very aggressive

treatment that's more effective than standard chemotherapy for ovarian cancer, and it isn't available in her community," says Gautam Rao, M.D., an assistant professor of obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive sciences and surgery at University of Maryland School of Medicine.

Such innovative approaches to gynecologic cancers, as well as a multidisciplinary tumor board and expanding clinical trials program, have fueled the huge recent growth of the Division of Gynecologic Oncology, which encompasses UMGCC and University of Maryland Medical Center (UMMC). About 125 patients with cancers of the reproductive system were treated here in 2013, a 135% jump in cases since 2006.

THE GYNECOLOGIC ONCOLOGY TEAM includes: Jill Hershberger, PA-C, Dana Roque, M.D., and Gautam Rao, M.D.



### UTERINE CANCER INCREASING

A multidisciplinary gynecologic oncology team that includes oncologists, radiologists, pathologists, nurse practitioners, genetic counselors, social workers, dieticians and others evaluates and treats the full spectrum of gynecologic malignancies. Uterine cancer is most often seen at UMGCC, followed by ovarian and cervical cancers, Dr. Rao explains.

But the team also tackles vaginal and vulvar cancers, along with suspected or pre-invasive cases of all of these conditions. Additionally, screening and surveillance programs are offered for women at risk of ovarian, uterine or cervical cancer and women with abnormal Pap tests and ovarian cysts or masses.

Uterine cancer — diagnosed in nearly 53,000 women in the United States each year, according to the American Cancer Society — is becoming more prevalent nationally as well as in the Baltimore region largely because of the obesity epidemic, explains Dana Roque, M.D., assistant professor of obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive sciences at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

About two-thirds of Americans are either overweight or obese, according to national statistics, and the risk of uterine cancer is higher in those with more fat cells, which serve to store cancer-fueling estrogen.

“We treat many patients with advanced ovarian cancer, since we lack adequate screening tests for early detection,” says Dr. Roque, who came to UMMC last summer. “While survival rates have improved since the

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- DANA ROQUE, M.D.

1970s due to novel chemotherapeutic strategies, it’s unfortunately often a disease that continues to present at stage III or IV.”

Dr. Rao notes that Baltimore’s large underserved patient population contributes to a higher-than-normal prevalence of cervical cancer because many women in this group don’t receive regular screenings.

### TUMOR BOARD INDIVIDUALIZES TREATMENT

A multidisciplinary tumor board comprised of a variety of gynecologic oncology specialists review patients’ cases each week, Dr. Rao says. Notably, this comprehensive approach doesn’t include just the medical facts pertaining to each patient.

“Each case is discussed to formulate an individualized treatment plan, and we develop an understanding of other aspects such as a patient’s barriers to accessing care,” Dr. Roque says. “We also review concurrent medical problems that might contribute to our particular treatment approach.”

That same comprehensive approach extends to Drs. Rao and Roque’s participation in both surgery and chemotherapy for their patients who undergo both types of treatments. In

many hospitals, different specialists hand off these tasks, but UMMC offers greater continuity, which patients find comforting. “It’s a strength that ultimately adds to their care,” Dr. Roque says.

UMMC offers a full spectrum of treatments for gynecologic cancers, ranging from radical and minimally invasive surgeries; reconstructive and fertility-sparing surgery, when appropriate; chemotherapy; various types of internal and external radiation therapies; and evaluation and treatment for patients at high genetic risk of gynecologic malignancies.

Leading-edge treatments available here that often can’t be found in other centers include intraperitoneal chemotherapy for ovarian cancer along with targeted drugs for ovarian malignancies. These newer drugs attack specific molecules expressed by ovarian tumors, avoiding bothersome side effects from conventional chemotherapy, which kills healthy cells along with diseased cells.

But that doesn’t mean patients from outside the immediate area can’t benefit from UMMC’s expertise.

| cont’d p15

# PATIENT-CENTERED APPROACH OFFERS LATEST TREATMENTS FOR GYNECOLOGIC CANCERS | CONT'D FROM P9

Thanks to the regional University of Maryland Cancer Network with Upper Chesapeake Medical Center in Bel Air, Baltimore Washington Medical Center in Glen Burnie and St. Joseph Medical Center in Towson, gynecologic oncologists at UMMC coordinate care with oncologists at those facilities so patients can receive superior treatment while staying in their own communities, Dr. Rao says.

## NEW CLINICAL TRIALS PLANNED

Drs. Roque and Rao are enthusiastic about ongoing efforts to expand UMMC's clinical trials program and evaluate experimental treatments that include both chemotherapy and targeted drugs for ovarian, uterine and cervical cancers. The team is engaged in all types of research, from bench-to-bedside to basic and translational studies.

Active research efforts include:

- A national, multi-center clinical trial to examine a targeted drug that

blocks the activity of the MEK protein, which is instrumental to the growth of ovarian cancer.

- An analysis of tumor resistance to taxol-based chemotherapies, which are routinely used to treat gynecologic cancers. Dr. Roque is building on previous research from a fellowship at Yale University to identify biomarkers that predict this chemo resistance, which could prompt the development of novel drugs to serve as alternative therapies.
- A potential tissue repository at UMGCC for gynecologic cancer patients who wish to anonymously donate cells for laboratory research.

With the average age of a gynecologic cancer diagnosis hovering in the mid-60s, Drs. Roque and Rao are passionate about the impact their treatment and research may have on typical patients.

"Women at that point of life are the matriarchs of their family, and their

cancer affects their whole family," Dr. Rao says. "That's why we do what we do, so they can see their grandchildren grow up and help them experience all of the life events that are important to them and their families."

## TREATING THE WHOLE WOMAN

Gynecologic oncology is just one area of expertise within the Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences. A clear strength at the University of Maryland is the complete range of women's health specialists who provide patient-centered care for the whole woman, focusing on the medical, personal and social needs of the patient. +



Patients of Drs. Rao and Roque are seen in the Stoler Pavilion at UMGCC. Appointments can be made at **410-328-7904**.

## UPCOMING CME ACTIVITIES

Offered by the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

❖ LEADING EDGE ECHOCARDIOGRAPHY AND INTERVENTIONAL PROCEDURES FOR ACUTE CARE

Feb. 13  
April 17  
Oct. 16

❖ MAINTENANCE OF CERTIFICATION IN ANESTHESIA (MOCA) PART IV REQUIREMENT: SIMULATION EDUCATION COURSE

Feb. 21	May 16
March 7	June 13
April 25	

**Most events will be held on the University of Maryland Baltimore campus. For details and registration information, please visit:**  
<https://cmetracker.net/UMD/Catalog>

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