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Program Keeps Tabs on Childhood Cancer Survivors

BY LACEY MEYER

One of only a few programs of its kind in the country, the After the Cancer Experience (ACE) program at UT Southwestern Medical Center and Children's Medical Center in Dallas provides lifelong follow-up care for survivors of childhood cancer.

Diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia at age 4, Alexandra Wilson, now 18, has yearly checkups at the ACE clinic.

“Every year I come back, they always find new things,” she says. “I’ve had heart problems, and without keeping in contact I never would have known. Even though I’m cured, there are so many side effects of the chemotherapy, you just have to be on top of things.”

Studies show up to two-thirds of childhood cancer survivors will experience a long-term complication as a result of their cancer or its treatment and one-fourth will experience a severe or life-threatening complication. According to the program’s medical director, Dan Bowers, MD, of UT Southwestern Medical Center, many of these complications don’t arise until several years or decades after treatment.

Childhood cancer survivors are eligible for the ACE program beginning two years after completing treatment. Once they turn 18, they are then seen by Angela Orfino, MD, who is board-certified in both pediatrics and internal medicine. “There is a seamless transition from their care as children at the pediatric hospital through their transition to adulthood,” says Bowers.

Wilson has participated in the ACE program since she went into remission at age 6. “I come back and I know the people every time, and I have this support and relationship with them.”

Survivors are typically seen once a year, although it can vary depending on an individual’s needs and situation. Nearly 2,000 childhood cancer survivors participate in the ACE program and range from 3 to 59 years old.

“That’s just an example of what sets us apart, because many of the survivor programs for children under 18 do not have a counterpart in the adult world,” Bowers says. In addition to the annual checkup, other services include routine screenings for second cancers, education about risk factors and health maintenance, and the opportunity to participate in research studies about the unique problems and needs of childhood cancer survivors.

For more information, visit www.childrens.com/ace or call 214-456-2948.