

Helping Patients Breathe Easier

The new Children's Pulmonary Hypertension Program is making a difference in the lives of children who suffer from this rare and challenging problem.



► Clinical Nurse Coordinator Angela Hawthorne examines Jordan Moore, a Pulmonary Hypertension Clinic patient.

When Patricia Lawrence arrived in Atlanta in April 2011, she sat down at a desk with paper, a pen and no computer. Her assignment? To build a program centered around evaluation and management of pulmonary hypertension, so she set about creating the Children's Pulmonary Hypertension Program. The program began with a dozen patients and now, less than two years later, has more than 100.

As part of the Sibley Heart Center, the Children's Pulmonary Hypertension Program is now one of the largest pediatric pulmonary

hypertension programs in the country, and its success is partly attributable to its unique offering—a combination of nursing, cardiology and pulmonology, that seeks to treat the disease and educate families about the disease's realities.

Pulmonary hypertension is caused by abnormally high blood pressure in the arteries of the lungs, which makes the right side of the heart work harder than normal. There is no known cure, but the symptoms can be managed if the disease is diagnosed early.

Lawrence describes the disease as "a challenge," one she and her team face through communication and teamwork. The team, led by Usama Kanaan, M.D., includes three cardiologists (Nikhil Chanani, M.D., Dennis Kim, M.D., Ph.D., and Kevin Maher, M.D.) one pulmonologist (Dawn Simon, M.D.) and nurses coordinated by Angela Hawthorne, MS, RN-BC, CPN.

Having both cardiologists and pulmonologists on hand makes the program successful. Pulmonary hypertension in children is rare and challenging. The signs and symptoms are vague and often go misdiagnosed, and the disease itself is medically complex.

Challenging though it may be, catching early signs of pulmonary hypertension can make a big difference in the life of a child.

Tucker Mitchell, a young boy with Down syndrome, was referred to the program in 2011 when an echocardiogram revealed

he had pulmonary hypertension at a routine visit. He was only 17 months old. Through the program, Tucker received a catheter procedure to repair a heart defect and went through other sleep studies and procedures to improve his condition. A year later, his symptoms have been eliminated, and he's happy, healthy and a huge flirt. His family is grateful to the program and asked for donations to the program instead of birthday gifts last year.

Tucker's mother shared her gratefulness to Children's on Facebook. "If it wasn't for the [Pulmonary Hypertension Program], we wouldn't have known about any of these issues. Thank you Children's for having this program in place. I believe it, and our faith in God, truly saved my son's life."

Tucker's story is proof that the Pulmonary Hypertension Program is up to the challenge of combating this difficult disease. As the program continues to grow, the focus will remain on making life better for the patients and their families. ■