Wound, Heal Thyself

A New Division of Surgery Tackles One of the Most Daunting Challenges in Medicine

The sore under the patient’s big toe didn’t hurt, but it wasn’t getting better. The 64-year-old woman with type 2 diabetes for many years had done a good job of keeping her blood sugar under control, but because her nerves had been damaged by diabetes, she didn’t notice blisters or sores on the soles of her feet. This one was bigger than a dime and not inflamed, so the woman’s doctor reassured her that in time it would heal.

By the time she had heard Harold Brem, M.D., chief of NYU Langone’s new Division of Wound Healing and Regenerative Medicine, an antibiotic-resistant infection had eaten its way down to the bone. Amputation had eaten its way down to the bone. Amputation was the only option.

Dr. Brem explains that pressure ulcers, or bedsores, cost the most lives; diabetic ulcers claim the most limbs; and venous ulcers, which afflict mostly the elderly, cause the most suffering.

A firm believer that “every wound can and will heal with proper care,” Dr. Brem has merged research and clinical efforts in the new division, which is part of the Department of Surgery. “All of our research is translational,” he says, “purposed only if the results will directly and significantly benefit the patient.” The result is a set of protocols designed to prevent ulcers from developing and to ensure complete healing if they do. Those include daily examination and swift treatment of any break in the skin. Wounds are measured, photographed, and tracked using advanced informat-

ics via a Wound Electronic Medical Record. Diseased tissue is removed surgically, leaving healthy tissue at the margins. Cellular and collagen therapy is applied to tap the patient’s natural ability to regenerate tissue.

The division’s multidisciplinary team of health-care professionals provides same-day coverage for impa-
tions with a break in the skin and same-week cover-
age for outpatient. Nurses are specially trained to assess wounds and, if appropriate, refer patients for treatment at Tisch Hospital and NYU Hospital for Joint Diseases.

“NYU has created the best clinical surgical depart-
ment on the East Coast,” says Dr. Brem, who was recruited from Columbia University’s Department of Surgery, where he directed the wound-healing program. “By putting all these resources under one roof, we can offer patients a unique set of services with seamless care.”

Dr. Brem’s research program is focused on the hypothesis that non-healing wounds are a localized biological phenomenon rather than a systemic pathol-

ogy. An ongoing funded clinical trial is testing a way to deliver a gene that makes a protein that can reverse a non-healing wound. The next step is finding out which genes stop the wound from healing. “We hope to one day just reverse the genes,” says Dr. Brem. “Meanwhile, our goal is to return patients to their referring physician, nursing facility, or home in the same condi-
tion they were in prior to the wound.”

For more information, call (212) 263-7187 or visit NYUWound.org.

WHAT’S COOKING IN FOOD SERVICE?

Plenty, Says the New Director, Who Has a Heavenly Appetite for Quality

Kosher sushi. Organic coffee. Greek yogurt. Is there a new gourmet deli in the neighborhood? Actually, these items can be found in our cafeterias. When it comes to savouriness, hospital food has traditionally been ranked somewhere in between the fare served by airlines and prisons. But now, if you cruise through our cafeterias, you might come away with a love for love.

Regina Tomney Bueno, senior director of food and nutrition service, leads a team of 275 that is determined to make “world class” the motto of the food, not just the medicine, at NYU. Since arriving last September, she has given the institution a food face lift. There are weekly themes, featuring the cuisine and décor of countries like Greece and Ethiopia, and the vending machines stock healthier selections like the vitamin water and gluten-free and nut-free snacks. The Tisch Hospital cafeteria will be overhauled; Central Park, the Starbuck’s coffee stand, will be rebuilt and expanded; and patient food will be served fresh, not reheated.

“I am aiming to have the best hospital food in the United States, but we have a long way to go,” says Tomney Bueno, who holds degrees in nutrition chemistry and healthcare administration. So far, the plan seems to be working. In April, sales increased by 19 percent in both the main and student cafeterias compared to the same month last year.

“I don’t feel like I’m in a hospital cafeteria,” says Charles Bridgemann, director of MCR’s Television Services, “I have the feeling of walking into an upscale French restaurant.” Inevitably at the cafeteria I just didn’t like it. Nor eat there twice a day.

Patient meals will also be enhanced, starting in selected areas this summer and expanding to the rest of the Medical Center by the end of the year. Trays will be equipped with induction heating pads to keep freshly cooked food at 185 degrees, replacing the current practice of chilling cooked food and then reheating it on the tray.

And breakfast will become a hot meal, one of 1,500 served each day.

“Doctors who bring patients their meals will work more closely with a smaller number of patients—taking their orders, personally assembling their trays, and delivering their food,” Dr. Bueno explained. “The goal is to reduce miscommunication and ensure that patients receive what they request.”

If patients don’t eat, they can’t get nutrition,” she adds. “When you’re sick, your taste is off to begin with. If the food is unappetizing, you’re less likely to eat it. Improving the food is not only a consumer issue, but a patient care issue.”

BOOKS AND OTHER BEST FRIENDS

Pediatric Perri Klass Empowers Parents to Read to Their Children — and Colleagues to Read Between the Lines

Dr. Perri Klass was raised in a house brimming with books. She remembers the sight of novels, biographies, short stories, and fables neatly shelved in every room—and there’s something very exciting about also reading aloud to the children almost every night in different voices and accents.

She learned to love books and write about her own mother, an English professor—write, 16, all novels. At Harvard Medical School she finished her writing career, contributing articles to Mademoiselle and The New York Times and authoring her first book. In 2006 she came to NYU as professor of pediatriciatrics and pediatrics.

Along the way, she has become one of America’s most distinguished and prolific physician-writers, garnering, among other prizes, five O. Henry Awards for short fiction.

And the honors keep coming. In Febru-
ary President George W. Bush nominated Dr. Klass to the Advisory Board of the National Institute for Literacy. She was also recently appointed to the National Advisory Council of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, part of the National Institutes of Health.

As a mother of three, now it’s her turn to pass on the family passion for reading. And as a physician of many more children than that, she wants to pass up the opportunity to put books in their hearts. Dr. Klass is the medical director of Reach Out and Read, a national literacy program aimed at at-risk kids. In this role, she oversees the training of physicians who are taught to integrate books and advice about reading into their pediat-

ric practices. Through this highly acclaimed program, healthcare providers around the country give out more than 5 million books a year to disadvantaged children. Starting at 6 months old, children receive a new book each visit, with at least 10 books in their fledgling library by the time they reach kindergarten.

For children, physical, mental, and developmental health are tied, and are very closely related to what goes on between a mother and her child. In the beginning, you start seeing the books as bright little spots on your mental map of the city.

In the playful of the pediatric procedures, conducted at Bellevue Hospital, where Dr. Perri Klass sees patients, she shares the wonder of words with a visitor.

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NEWS & VIEWS