Survivor Spotlight: Anastasia Spiecker

“Any time whatever I am facing in life starts to feel challenging, I remember where I’ve been and what I’ve been through. It reminds me of how strong I really am and how I’ve been guided and blessed even in the darkest times in my life,” said Anastasia Spiecker.

Six years ago, Anastasia had a suspicion something felt “off” in her body when she began to develop severely itchy skin and night sweats. Because these symptoms could be associated with several more minor causes, none of the doctors Anastasia spoke with over the course of a year ever gave her reason to think it could be anything as serious as cancer. While on vacation, the symptoms became so intense she couldn’t tolerate them any longer. Anastasia went to an emergency clinic where they did a chest X-ray and CT scan and found a 17 cm mediastinum tumor in her chest.

After being diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma stage 2B, Anastasia went through ABVD chemotherapy and was advised to undergo a radiation treatment as a follow-up to ensure all microscopic cancer cells were killed.

“I was wary of having radiation after receiving chemotherapy due to the increased risk for late side effects. However, a friend of mine told me about proton therapy so I went for a consultation,” said Anastasia. “I met with Dr. Hoppe who explained the process and told me I would be a good candidate for a study he was doing. The fact that proton therapy is more targeted and efficient, and has a smaller chance of
Anastasia’s treatment went very smoothly overall. Compared to chemotherapy, she recalled the treatment itself was very easy and allowed her to maintain normalcy in her life. “I’ve performed as a singer/songwriter in St. Augustine and Jacksonville since my mid-teens and at the time of my diagnosis and treatment I was earning most of my income through performing. I was able to continue performing throughout chemo and proton therapy, though I did so at a slower pace,” said Anastasia. “My diagnosis pushed me to record a full-length album collection of a selection of songs I had written over the years and I had a CD release party in St. Augustine on May 12, 2009. Coincidentally, I gave birth to my daughter exactly four years later on May 12, 2013, which was Mother’s Day.”

When Anastasia finished her proton therapy treatment in October 2009, she packed her bags for Tallahassee and began pursuing a master’s in music therapy at Florida State University. While her diagnosis and treatment delayed the start of her graduate school experience by a semester, Anastasia was determined for it to not change her course.

“I am grateful for every day after surviving cancer. It may sound cliché but it’s true,” said Anastasia. Her favorite thing to do is to spend time with her now 14-month-old daughter, watching how she transforms over time and embraces life. Anastasia also continues following her passion for music as a guitar and piano teacher in St. Augustine.

To other survivors, those going through treatment or those just diagnosed with cancer, Anastasia gives this advice, “Let people help you, even just by being there for you. No matter what happens, do your best to stay positive. We may not be able to control all things but we do have some control over how we react in the face of adversity. Allowing the people who really care about you to stay close to you and support you is healthy.”

**Early evidence suggests proton therapy offers safe, long-term treatment for Hodgkin lymphoma**

A first-of-its-kind study conducted by UFPI researchers was recently published in the *International Journal of Radiation Oncology Biology Physics* and tracks the three-year outcome results of proton therapy treatment on patients with Hodgkin lymphoma. The study, “Involved-Node Proton Therapy in Combined-Modality Therapy for Hodgkin Lymphoma,” shows that the use of proton therapy following chemotherapy in patients with Hodgkin lymphoma has a success rate on par with conventional radiation treatments but with a
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Child life program success gains international recognition

more targeted approach, further adding to the mounting evidence supporting the use of proton radiation therapy for positive long-term treatment outcomes.

While several retrospective dosimetry studies, measuring the radiation dose in tissue resulting from exposure to direct and/or indirect radiation, have reported the advantages of proton therapy in Hodgkin lymphoma as a way of reducing radiation doses to the body, this study is the first of its kind to track the results of proton therapy treatment on patients with Hodgkin lymphoma.

The most significant part of this study is the reduced radiation dose to organs at risk (i.e., heart, lungs and breast) and the 50-60 percent reduction in total body radiation. This reduction is expected to reduce the late-effects incurred from treatment, such as organ malfunction, heart/lung disease and secondary cancers. While the larger benefit of protons is not expected to be visible for 10-30 years from now, since that’s when the secondary cancers and other diseases from radiation develop, for Hodgkin lymphoma patients, who are usually teens or young adults, this can mean a longer and better quality of life when they reach age 30, 40, 50 and beyond.

“All 15 patients derived benefits from using proton therapy. The results show that the use of protons, as opposed to similar conventional photon therapy, reduced the risk of long-term side effects by reducing or eliminating radiation doses to healthy tissue without compromising the cure rate,” said lead researcher Bradford S. Hoppe, M.D., radiation oncologist at the UF Proton Therapy Institute and assistant professor in the University of Florida College of Medicine department of radiation oncology.
Play and fun are part of the “prescription” when it comes to treating children with proton therapy. “When a child is faced with an unfamiliar setting or experience their reaction is to run or fear the situation. Opportunities for play and fun encourage normal development and coping skills for children, in spite of challenging circumstances,” said Kim Ely, certified child life specialist at UFPTI.

It’s this unique blend of play and education that has dramatically improved the rates of children requiring daily anesthesia for treatment – dropping from 94 percent to 50 percent in children ages five to seven.

The impressive results of the program have garnered international attention. At the beginning of June, Kim was asked to present her methods and the benefits of certified child life specialists at the First Nordic Symposium in Pediatric Proton Therapy held in Sweden. More than 125 individuals from hospitals across Sweden, Norway and other Nordic countries were in attendance to hear about and discuss updates to pediatric proton treatment and care for patients.

“It’s rare that a child life specialist, over their entire career, gets invited for an international talk. So it’s quite a significant recognition,” said Daniel J. Indelicato, M.D., UFPTI pediatric program director and pediatric radiation oncologist. “We are very fortunate to have Kim as a member of our team.”

The invitation came from Ann-Christin Björklund (pictured with Kim above), the nurse case manager of Sweden’s first pediatric patient treated at UFPTI – a four-year-old, bright-eyed little girl. Because of the deliberate and precise nature of proton therapy, a majority of young children need an anesthetic to remain still throughout their procedure. Through Kim’s methods, she was able to prepare the four-
year-old Swedish girl for her treatment so effectively that she was able to remain still throughout her entire procedure without the use of anesthesia.

At the Symposium, Kim shared how hands-on play, such as fitting a face mask or putting an IV in a stuffed animal and reenacting treatment in a mock gantry, helps familiarize patients with the medical equipment and routines. Kim focuses on providing the children with opportunities to experience the treatment process through all their senses, from the touch of gloves to the smells of the mask and the sounds in the room.

“Children can grasp complex ideas, like cancer treatment, if you reach them on their level. Familiarity and understanding help them gain mastery over what is happening,” said Kim. “The process also allows the child to express any feelings, concerns or fears they may have.”

Kim is hoping that her presentation and experience can lead to a greater utilization of child life specialists across various medical venues and settings.

**New open-access journal on particle therapy**

The Particle Therapy Cooperative Group (PTCOG), an international non-profit organization comprised of physicians, physicists and dosimetristis interested in the therapeutic use of particle therapy, recently launched the inaugural issue of its new peer-reviewed journal, the *International Journal of Particle Therapy (IJPT)*. The journal is free to the public and will be released quarterly, providing a venue for discussion of all issues related to particle therapy, including physics, biology, treatment planning, technology development, socioeconomic and ethical concerns in proton therapy, carbon ion therapy and their impact on cancer.

Leading the large editorial staff of experts from around the world is UFPTI’s medical director Dr. Nancy Mendenhall, the journal’s editor-in-chief, and UFPTI’s Dr. William Mendenhall, its operating editor.

To read the inaugural issue containing the latest research, expert reviews and proceedings from PTCOG’s 52nd annual meeting, visit the official website of *IJPT* at [www.theijpt.org](http://www.theijpt.org). You can also follow *IJPT* on Facebook ([https://www.facebook.com/theijpt](https://www.facebook.com/theijpt)) and Twitter ([https://twitter.com/theijpt](https://twitter.com/theijpt)).

**Cancer awareness spotlight**

Sarcoma is a cancer of connective tissues, such as nerves, muscles, joints, fat and bones. Although rare in adults, this cancer represents
15 percent of all childhood cancer cases, according to the Sarcoma Foundation of America. The National Cancer Institute recognizes that sarcoma is often misdiagnosed and underreported, which is why July has been named National Sarcoma Awareness month – to spread awareness of the many forms of the disease and encourage screenings of lumps and bumps at an early stage.

The nature of bone and soft tissue sarcomas make them ideal candidates for treatment with proton therapy. Since sarcomas are often located near sensitive tissues and require high doses for a cure, it’s important to treat them with the most precise type of radiation possible. In addition, many high risk sarcomas are treated with chemotherapy that may intensify the effects of radiation on adjacent organs and bones. By minimizing the overlap of chemotherapy and radiation in normal tissue, proton therapy may reduce the side effects of treatment.

According to the 2009 sarcoma guidelines from the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN), proton therapy may offer a therapeutic advantage over traditional radiation techniques in the treatment of certain sarcomas. A complete list of sarcomas treated at UFPTI as well as more information on treatment is included on the UFPTI website.