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Media Contact:
Theresa Makrush
mobile: (904) 505-6157
tmakrush@shepherdagency.com

Grant to help UF Radiation Oncology study radiotherapy effects on brain tumors, scholastic outcomes

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (March 26, 2021) — Fueled by a grant from the Live Like Bella® Pediatric Cancer Research Initiative, researchers at the University of Florida Health Proton Therapy Institute will advance their work on measuring the effects of radiotherapy and brain tumors on scholastic outcome.

The Florida Department of Health has awarded Raymond Mailhot Vega, M.D., M.P.H., assistant professor of radiation oncology at the University of Florida, a \$247,000 grant from the Live Like Bella® initiative, established in 2017 to honor the life of Bella Rodriguez-Torres and the work of the Live Like Bella® Childhood Cancer Foundation.

Compared to conventional radiation, proton therapy reduces the amount of healthy tissue exposed to radiation. While both brain tumors and radiotherapy can damage children's cognitive abilities, as shown in prospective postradiotherapy studies measuring IQ, recent research indicates focal proton therapy controls cancer as well as conventional radiation without as significant decrements in IQ.

Mailhot Vega's study, "Measuring the effects of brain radiotherapy and tumor on scholastic outcome," will explore the relationship between brain tumors, proton therapy, and scholastic success using proton institute data and scores from the Florida Department of Education statewide Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tests, or FCAT, on student performance.

Beginning in 2001, the FCAT was expanded to grades 3 through 10, allowing for the calculation of annual student learning gains. Since 2019, physicians at the proton therapy institute have treated about 900 children with brain tumors, reflecting the largest experience in pediatric proton therapy worldwide.

“By focusing on our Floridian patients, we are well-poised to study the relationship between pediatric brain tumors, proton therapy, and scholastic success within our community,” said Maillhot Vega, who is a member of the UF Health Cancer Center. “Our aim is to determine the change in scholastic ability, as measured by FCAT scores, in the years leading up to cancer diagnosis and after cancer treatment among local children with brain tumors treated at the proton therapy institute. In addition, we will evaluate if any disparities in scholastic outcomes exist in our pediatric survivors by race or ethnicity.”

The collaborative team includes Daniel Indelicato, M.D., professor of radiation oncology, a member of the UF Health Cancer Center, and the William and Joan Mendenhall Endowed Chair of Pediatric Radiotherapy at the University of Florida, and M. David Miller, Ph.D., professor of research and evaluation methodology at the UF College of Education.

“Academic achievement is one of the keys to determining the futures of Florida’s children. Thus it is imperative that we understand how academic achievement is affected by health status and treatment,” said Miller. “In this study we expect to determine the effect of brain tumors and treatment on academic achievement as measured by the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.”

The University of Florida is a leader in research, including its comprehensive academic health center UF Health.

“On behalf of all of us at the Live Like Bella® Childhood Cancer Foundation I would like to congratulate both Dr. Maillhot Vega and the University of Florida for receiving a grant from the Live Like Bella® Initiative,” said Nicole de Lara Puente, CEO of the Live Like Bella® Childhood Cancer Foundation. “This is one of ten awards in four years that UF has received from the Initiative and we are so grateful to the university’s commitment to battling childhood cancer. Families around the world whose children are bravely undergoing treatment will benefit from this research for generations to come,” she added.

For information about the Live Like Bella® Pediatric Cancer Research Initiative, visit floridahealth.gov/provider-and-partner-resources/research/research-programs1/live-like-bella.html. To learn more about the life and legacy of Bella Rodriguez-Torres and the work of the Live Like Bella® Childhood Cancer Foundation, visit livelikebella.org.

The UF Health Proton Therapy Institute is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization affiliated with the UF College of Medicine and the UF Health Cancer Center, a Florida Cancer Center of

Excellence, dedicated to delivering state-of-the-art cancer treatment and setting new standards for treating and curing cancer. It is an accredited radiation oncology facility by the American College of Radiology. The cancer treatment facility houses both conventional radiation and proton therapy, and delivers proton therapy to 100 patients a day. For more information about the UF Health Proton Therapy Institute, please visit www.floridaproton.org.

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