

Personal **BLESSING**

A publication of
B *BLESSING*
Health System

OUR PATIENTS. THEIR STORIES.

SPRING/SUMMER 2023



Finding the beauty in life after cancer

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from the Blessing
President/CEO
INSIDE COVER

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heart team kept a
man in the hunt
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you can see life in
a new way
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Published by the Marketing, Communications & Community Relations staff of Blessing Health, *Personal Blessing* provides general information on health-related topics. It is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, which should always be obtained from your physician.

The Blessing Health System Mission Statement:

To improve the health of our communities

The Blessing Health System Vision Statement:

Blessing Health System will be exceptional

- in providing a safe, high-quality healthcare experience;
- in being the best place for providers to practice;
- in being a place where employees want to work and students want to learn; and
- in partnering with our communities.

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Thank you.

By Maureen Kahn, RN, MHA, MSN, president/chief executive officer, Blessing Health System

Thank you for your support during my 22 years at Blessing Health. I retire on October 6 to enjoy family time after 48 years as a bedside nurse and health care leader.

This region is important to me. My goal has been to help recruit skilled caregivers and bring quality services to Blessing that allow you to get the health care you need locally. If we could do it here, and it made sense, I wanted to make sure we provided it here for you and your loved ones.



Brian Canfield

Over the past two decades we:

- expanded heart services, with the addition of cardiac electrophysiology and our cardiologists traveling to Blessing facilities throughout the region to see patients, so patients did not have to do the traveling;
- recruited a talented team of orthopedic surgeons;
- acquired state-of-the-art robotic technology to make the latest minimally invasive procedures available, and opened the Blessing Surgery Center;
- and built the Moorman Pavilion to increase the number of private rooms available.

Blessing also holds national recognition for quality including heart, cancer and stroke care, patient safety and the country's highest honor for nursing excellence.

The health care needs of you and your loved ones were always the first thing on my mind.

Beginning October 7, **Brian Canfield** will lead the Blessing Health team as its President/Chief Executive Officer. He joined the Blessing leadership

team in 2022, after nine years as chief operating officer at FirstHealth of The Carolinas and Moore Regional Hospital, Pinehurst, North Carolina, where he was responsible for four hospitals and a staff of 4,500 employees.

During the 28 years before that, Brian served in the United States Army. In Afghanistan, he was responsible for 12 hospitals, 32 clinics, 14 forward surgical teams and all ground and air medical evacuation resources for over a half-million U.S. military and partner nation forces. He then became CEO/Commanding Officer of Womack Army Medical Center, Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Brian is a Fellow of the American College of Healthcare Executives and holds the following degrees: Master of Healthcare Administration, Master of Business Administration and Master of National Security and Strategic Studies.

You are fortunate to have Brian Canfield at the helm of Blessing Health. He is a leader with international experience whose focus is on community needs.

In closing, thank you for the support you have given me for the past two decades. I will miss being a part of your exceptional Blessing Health team. ■

Blessing Health

THE HEART OF YOUR CARE

With appointments available throughout the region, the Heart & Vascular team at Blessing Health brings your cardiac care close to home. Appointments can be scheduled in Quincy, Pittsfield, Macomb & Warsaw in Illinois and in Hannibal, Kahoka, & Memphis in Missouri. Blessing Health proudly provides a **complete range of quality cardiac services**, including **cardiothoracic surgery with a designated cardiovascular unit**, cardiac catheterization lab, **regionally exclusive electrophysiology lab**, and a structural heart care team, all in one convenient location within Blessing Hospital.

Meet the Team

ELECTROPHYSIOLOGY



JOHN HAMMOCK,
MD, FACC, FHRS



OLEG YUREVICH, MD



SHANNA DIERKER,
APRN-FNP



AMY BATES,
APRN-AGACNP



DIANA WEATHERFORD,
RN

CARDIOTHORACIC SURGERY



JOHN ARNOLD, MD



MICHAEL HART, DO



ANDREA LEONE, DNP,
AGACNP-BC, FNP-C



JUSTIN HARTUPEE,
MD, PhD



RICHARD HA,
MD, FACC, FACP



ALYSSA CROWE,
AGACNP-BC



STACY LOWARY,
APRN-FNP

HEART FAILURE

GENERAL CARDIOLOGY

NON-INVASIVE CARDIOLOGY

INVASIVE CARDIOLOGY

INTERVENTIONAL CARDIOLOGY



UMUT GOMCELI, MD,
FACC, FASE



FAROOQ JUNAID, DO



ELIOT NISSENBAUM,
DO, FACC, FCCP



IRVING SCHWARTZ,
MD, FACC



JEFFREY COOK,
MD, FACC, FSCAI



IMTIAZ ISMAIL, MD

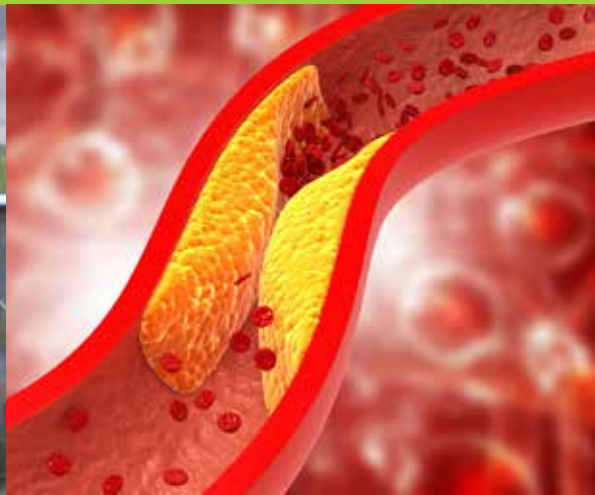


STEVEN KRAUSE,
DO, MHA, FACOI

Call **217.214.3424**
to schedule an appointment.

B **BLESSING**
Health System

blessinghealth.org/heart



LURKING IN THE BACKGROUND

When a family
history becomes a
present-day reality



Steve Rush with
one of his quails and
hunting dog, Jade

Steve Rush has a soft spot in his heart for his hunting dogs.

"I could go hunting and not even shoot. I just like working my dogs," said the 61-year-old Adams County resident. "If I didn't have dogs I wouldn't go hunting. I'll have a dog until my last day, probably."

That "last day" flashed before Steve's eyes sooner than he expected. It was the summer of 2022 when family history of heart disease caught up with him.

"I'd go out to water and feed the birds. When I was done, I'd have a little pain shooting up in my left shoulder," he said. Steve raises quail with which to train bird dogs.

"I'd complain about the pain to my wife and she'd say, 'You need to go get it looked at.' Guys don't like to go to the doctor, but finally she made an appointment for me." Steve's wife is a long-time Blessing nurse.

He went to see Blessing Health primary care provider **Ben Bukey, D.O.**, for a stress test. Steve was not too concerned about the test. He underwent stress tests before and always passed them successfully. Still, he joked with a nurse just before his test.

“When I walked in I said to the nurse, ‘One of these days I’m going to fail one of these.’ I did. When we were done, she told me I was not going home. I was admitted to the hospital.”

A cardiac catheterization the next day, performed by Blessing Health cardiologist **Steven Krause, D.O.**, showed four arteries blocked at least 95% in Steve’s heart. Open heart surgery was required.

“I was really surprised. I was hoping to need stents only,” Steve said.

Family history catches up with Steve

While he may have been surprised, heart disease runs in Steve’s family. His father and all 11 of his father’s brothers and sisters had heart disease. At least a couple of those relatives, including his father, required open heart surgery, and one uncle passed away at a young age due to heart disease.

“I was really nervous,” Steve stated. “In addition to my family, I had a coworker who passed away a few years ago. He had open heart surgery two or three times, and I remember him saying how scared he was.”

To make matters more stressful, Steve developed COVID-19 only days before his open heart surgery, delaying the procedure for nearly two weeks.

Steve’s recovery is bird dog-fast

When Blessing Health cardiothoracic surgeon **John Arnold, M.D.**, was able to perform Steve’s bypasses, he was on the road to recovery quickly

—nearly as fast as when his dogs spot a quail.

“Later in the day after surgery, nurses came in the room and said, ‘You’re going to walk now,’” Steve recalled. “I’m lying there thinking, ‘There is no way I am going to walk.’ They’re like, ‘Yes you are.’ We walked to the door of my room and back.”

“Every day they came in and got me to walk a little further each time.”

Steve had surgery on a Thursday and was home the following Sunday afternoon, where he continued his walking routine, building it up to a couple of miles each day.

Within a month, Steve was back to caring for his quail and bird dogs, and within two months, he was back at work full-time running his CNC lathe at Midwest Patterns in Quincy where he has worked for 35 years.

This guy will now make sure he sees his doctors

While a person cannot outrun family history, Steve is doing what he can to keep his heart strong including “eating more fruits than cupcakes,” and planning to see his doctors on a regular basis, including Drs. Krause and Bukey.

He also appreciates the care provided by Dr. Arnold.

“I hope I never have to do it again,” he said. “If I did, though, I’d go with Dr. Arnold. I trust him. He’s a good guy.”

In addition to Dr. Arnold, **Michael Hart, D.O.**, is a Blessing Health cardiovascular surgeon. ■



For more information on Blessing’s heart care, scan this code or go to blessinghealth.org/heart.



For more information on Blessing’s primary care services, scan this code or go to blessinghealth.org/familymedicine.

Meet the **ELECTRIFYING TEAM** serving Blessing Health heart patients



**Drs. Oleg Yurevich and John Hammock and their team
change lives in Blessing's EP Lab**

Oleg Yurevich, M.D., loves to learn. That's what drew him to cardiology and to the complex specialty of cardiac electrophysiology (EP). There is always something new to learn. In addition, he finds fulfillment in the immediate impact his care can have on a patient's health.

"It's a specialty where you see results right away," Dr. Yurevich said. "After I ablate someone's arrhythmia (a procedure to fix irregular heartbeat signals), the patient leaves the EP Lab with a normal heart rate. It feels good for them and for me. You see an immediate effect."

Dr. Yurevich recently joined Quincy native **John Hammock, M.D., FACC, FHRS**, as a member of Blessing Health's cardiac EP care team. Dr. Yurevich holds certification from the American Board of Internal Medicine with added certification in cardiovascular disease. He completed a general cardiology fellowship at SUNY (State University of New York) Downstate Health Science University, Brooklyn, and in clinical cardiac electrophysiology at the University of Illinois Chicago.

Dr. Hammock holds certification from the American Board of Internal Medicine with added certification in cardiovascular disease and clinical cardiac electrophysiology. He earned his medical degree from Southern Illinois University School of

Medicine in Springfield, completed an internship and residency at the University of Illinois Medical Center in Chicago, a fellowship at the University of Kentucky Medical Center in Lexington and a sub-fellowship in clinical cardiac electrophysiology at the University of Oklahoma Medical Center in Oklahoma City.

What is EP?

Cardiac electrophysiology is a specialized area of heart care focused on the electrical activities of the heart. The heart sends an electrical signal through the body's cells in order to regulate heart rate and rhythm.

An irregular heart rhythm is known as an arrhythmia. Complications depend on the type of arrhythmia from which a patient suffers. In general, complications of heart arrhythmias may include stroke, sudden death and heart failure. Heart arrhythmias are associated with an increased risk of blood clots. If a clot breaks loose, it can travel from the heart to the brain, causing a stroke.

An electrophysiologist may diagnose and treat conditions such as:

- bradycardia, a heartbeat that is too slow.
- tachycardia, a heartbeat that is too fast.
- atrial fibrillation, a quivery, fluttery heartbeat.
- cardiac arrest, the sudden stopping of the heart.
- other arrhythmias and heart disorders.

For more information on Blessing's heart care, scan this code or go to blessinghealth.org/heart.



How Blessing brought this specialized care to the region

For many years, Tri-State area residents with heart rhythm conditions needed to travel hundreds of miles for EP care. When Dr. Hammock joined Blessing Health, leaders knew he had an interest in cardiac electrophysiology. In 2012, Blessing Health administration approached Dr. Hammock with the idea to apply for an EP fellowship to add another level of heart care Blessing could provide to residents of the region.

“As I watched the Blessing Heart & Vascular Center program grow over the years, I noticed an increasing demand for electrophysiology services,” noted Dr. Hammock. “Seeing a substantial number of our patients leaving for things that could be done at Blessing, I thought, ‘I’m only young once. I might as well give it a shot and do one extra year of training.’”

Dr. Hammock was accepted into the clinical cardiac electrophysiology fellowship program at the University of Oklahoma Medical Center. The doctor, his wife and three children moved nearly 600 miles from Quincy to Oklahoma City for a year.

Meanwhile, Blessing leaders set their sights on constructing and equipping a state-of-the-art EP lab and training a team to assist Dr. Hammock in providing this highly specialized care by the time he completed his fellowship and returned to Quincy with his family.

The missions were accomplished by Dr. Hammock and by Blessing Health. Dr. Hammock and team performed the first EP procedure at Blessing in August 2013. Since that day, more than 4,100 other EP-related procedures have been performed in Blessing’s EP Lab.

With a second cardiac electrophysiologist now on staff at Blessing Health, even more people will be able to get this life-changing and life-saving care without having to leave the region. ■

Blessing’s heart care quality receives national recognition



Designated
BlueDistinction®
Center
Cardiac Care

Blessing Health recently received a Blue Distinction® Center for Cardiac Care designation by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Illinois, as part of the Blue Distinction Specialty Care program.

Blue Distinction Centers are nationally designated providers that meet quality standards and have proven to deliver quality care with safe practices that lead to better health outcomes for patients.

Health care facilities recognized as Blue Distinction Centers are assessed using quality information supplied by third-party data registries, which are evaluated based on objective measures that were developed with input from the medical community and leading accreditation and quality organizations.

Specifically, Blue Distinction Centers for Cardiac Care are providing quality care for patients and have lower in-hospital mortality rates and lower bleeding complication rates for angioplasty than non-Blue Distinction Centers. Designated facilities also meet national standards, with patients facing fewer readmissions and mortality rates for coronary artery bypass graft procedures and heart attacks, compared to facilities that do not meet the criteria.

“This designation recognizes the commitment of a large team of Blessing Health caregivers whose focus is to provide people across the Tri-State region with exceptional heart care so they can remain in the area, close to their support network of family and friends,” said **Steven Krause, D.O.**, Blessing Health cardiologist and medical director of the Blessing Heart & Vascular Center. “This is a win for the residents of the region.”

The Blessing Heart & Vascular Center offers a comprehensive care program that includes open heart surgery, heart catheterization and a number of specialty procedures, including cardiac electrophysiology to correct abnormal heart rhythms; TAVR, a procedure that replaces diseased heart valves without open heart surgery; and WATCHMAN, a procedure that decreases the risk for stroke in patients with atrial fibrillation not caused by a valve problem. Blessing cardiologists see patients in Quincy and Hannibal, and at clinics in Pittsfield, Hamilton-Warshaw and Macomb, Illinois and Memphis and Kahoka, Missouri. “This recognition shows that our members, employers, providers and communities can count on Blue Distinction Centers for access to health care that helps our members achieve their health goals,” said Dr. Derek Robinson, chief medical officer, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois.

For more information about the program and for a complete listing of the designated providers, visit **bcbs.com**.

Listen to your gut feeling



Julie Eftink sees the beauty in life in spite of cancer



Julie Eftink was not supposed to get this disease. She ate right, exercised regularly, felt strong and had no family history of the illness. Her genetic tests showed no abnormalities that lead to the condition, and the statistics said she was too young for it.

This disease does not care.

At the age of 43, Julie—mother of two active teenagers, wife of 19 years to Chad, and 20-year Blessing Health licensed clinical social worker—was diagnosed with rectal cancer. Most colorectal cancer patients are over the age of 50. But since the mid-1990s, cases among people younger than 50 years old have been on the rise, and medical experts expect that trend will continue and grow for a variety of reasons.

Julie's story

Julie is busy; in addition to her active family and full-time job as a mental health therapist, she is a small business owner with a home decor shop. "I love to create," Julie said.

In May 2021, she stated feeling funny, experiencing abdominal discomfort and bloating. The feelings would come and go.

"I thought it was acid reflux," Julie said. "I even had my gallbladder checked out."

No problems were found.

Then some changes in bowel movements began, and the frequency of symptoms increased. Julie saw her Blessing Health primary care provider, **Abby Reich, M.D.**, who referred her to Blessing's gastroenterology department and **Daniel Moore, M.D.** and **Mandy McAllister, APRN-FNP**. A colonoscopy was ordered. Julie, a positive person by nature, remained optimistic.

"Going into it I am thinking I've got Crohn's disease, or there is something off with my diet. It never crossed my mind that I was going to be told that I had cancer," Julie said.

The diagnosis: Stage 3 rectal cancer.

"Just disbelief," Julie said of hearing those words. "Thinking the worst thoughts that can enter your mind, am I going to be here as my children grow older? Feelings you never want to experience."

Julie chooses her treatment

Julie called on another of her personal characteristics—strength, and researched treatment options. In consultation with Blessing Health colorectal cancer surgeon **Harsha Polavarapu, M.D.**, she decided on total neoadjuvant treatment (TNT). That meant instead

of undergoing chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and surgery, followed by more chemotherapy as is common in rectal cancer care, Julie received short-course radiation followed by all chemotherapy upfront. Her hope was to avoid surgery and the need for a temporary ileostomy. That is a bowel diversion procedure that requires a pouch be attached to the abdomen to collect waste. It may be required as part of surgical care for colorectal cancer.

So, in cooperation with an experienced provider at Barnes Jewish Hospital, Julie became a patient of the nationally accredited Blessing Cancer Center. Over a five-month period, her care included five days of intense radiation therapy under the direction of **Robert Johnson, M.D.** and eight rounds of chemotherapy under the direction of medical oncologist **Kellie Flippin, M.D.**

“There has been great communication between Barnes and Blessing,” Julie said. Blessing is an original member of the multi-hospital BJC (Barnes Jewish Christian) Collaborative, which works to improve health care quality and efficiency.

Julie had her first post-treatment scan in June of 2022, four weeks after her last treatment, that showed no evidence of rectal cancer. She now undergoes extensive testing every three months to ensure the cancer remains in remission.

“I am cancer-free, but also prepared to have surgery if something shows up,” she said.

In addition to the care of her doctors and the strong support found in her faith, family and the community, Julie said **Diana Seals**, Blessing’s colorectal cancer patient navigator, made her treatment experience, “understandable and comforting.” As a patient navigator, Diana is available to attend appointments with a patient to take notes about what the doctor says to discuss them later with the patient, find answers to patients’ questions and provide support throughout treatment.

Lessons learned

“Just because you think you are healthy, don’t dismiss those symptoms,” Julie warned. “If your body is telling you something is wrong, listen to it. Get it checked out.” ■

The signs and symptoms of colorectal cancer are sneaky

Colorectal polyps (abnormal growths in the colon or rectum that can turn into cancer if not removed) and colorectal cancer don’t always cause symptoms, especially at first. Someone could have polyps or colorectal cancer and not know it. That is why getting screened regularly for colorectal cancer is so important. A person should talk with their health care provider about a screening schedule that is right for them.

If you have symptoms, they may include:

- a change in bowel habits.
- blood in or on your stool (bowel movement).
- diarrhea, constipation, or feeling that the bowel does not empty all the way.
- abdominal pain, aches, or cramps that don’t go away.
- weight loss and you don’t know why.

If you have any of these symptoms, talk to your doctor. They may be caused by something other than cancer. The only way to know what is causing them is to see your doctor.



To learn more about Blessing Health’s colorectal cancer services, scan this code or go to **blessinghealth.org/colon**.

Recognizing extraordinary care

Since the last issue of *Personal Blessing*, the following Blessing Hospital nurses joined the ranks of international DAISY award winners for delivery of extraordinary care, based on the nominations submitted by patients and their loved ones.



Bradley Beswick, Rehabilitation Services, was nominated by a patient for whom he was caring after an accident. *"I had so much pain I didn't want to live. Brad told me what I needed to do to ease the pain. He talked to me about what a great family I had and that I should fight to live so I could be with them longer. Brad, I feel like you truly made me want to live and that you helped me so much."*

Carlee Jenkins, General Medicine/Observation Decision Unit, was nominated by a patient in her care for helping bring the patient's concerns to other caregivers on the team. *"Carlee was a rock star who helped me get the medical care I needed and advocated for my needs. Thank you for your care. Thank you for your persistence. Thank you for listening to me. Thank you for looking past the tests and seeing what state I was in. Thank you for helping me get the medical attention I needed in order to save my life."*



Brogan McCutchan, Women and Children Unit, was nominated by the daughter of a 92-year-old patient who had been admitted to the hospital for the first time in her life after suffering injuries in a fall. *"Brogan was respectful of how much pain mom was in and went out of her way to do everything that she could to make mom's stay tolerable. She had several good suggestions on how mom could lay in bed to minimize pain. It is obvious that Brogan is a dedicated nurse not only patient oriented but also works well with patients' families. She sets a high example for the entire nursing staff at Blessing."*

Sara Murphy, Vascular Access Team, was nominated by the wife of a patient for whom she helped place a catheter. *"She gave me her number and told me to not hesitate to call or text any time we had any questions. I didn't think I would use it, but I did. Sara always took the time to reassure us that we were doing ok and never once made us feel like we were inconveniencing her with our incessant questions."*



Mariah Rice, Women and Children Unit, was nominated by the mother of a patient for whom she cared. *"Every single day she was not only there for my son, but also me as a mother. I was stressed out. She always made me feel heard and encouraged me to always advocate for my child; specifically stating, 'I'm just his nurse. You're his Mama. You know him the best.' Mariah is an incredible person, and we will forever be grateful for her diligence and care in helping get our boy back home and healthy."*

STAFF ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Jordan Stroot, lead registered radiographic technologist, RT(r), catheterization lab, has earned certification as a registered cardiovascular invasive specialist (RCIS) from Cardiovascular Credentialing International. An RCIS assists a cardiologist with cardiac catheterization procedures.

Nurses Eydie Tipton, Laura Weigand and Yvonne Goellner were featured in *Today's Geriatric Medicine* for their work in the implementation of the HART nurse program to more efficiently and effectively identify patients whose conditions are deteriorating.



Mohammad Choudhary, M.D., FICS

Dr. Choudhary has joined the department of surgery, specializing in trauma surgery. Certified by the American Board of Surgery, Dr. Choudhary completed residency at State University of New York and a fellowship in surgical critical care at Westchester Medical Center in Valhalla, NY. He earned his medical degree from King Edward Medical University in Lahore, Pakistan.



Myron Jones, M.D.

Dr. Jones has joined the otolaryngology (ear, nose and throat) department. A military veteran with more than 20 years of service, Dr. Jones is certified by the American Board of Otolaryngology—Head and Neck Surgery.

He earned his medical degree from the University of Florida College of Medicine in Gainesville, FL, and completed an internship at William Beaumont Army Hospital at Fort Bliss, TX, and residency at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, TX.



Nicolai Zhidkov, M.D.

Dr. Zhidkov has joined the department of hospital medicine. He completed his residency at Southern Illinois School of Medicine—Center for Family Medicine, Quincy, after receiving his medical degree from St. George's University, Grenada.

Welcome

New treatments available for lung, urology conditions

Got to go!

Blessing Health's Urology team offers a new treatment for urge incontinence, the sudden, intense urge to urinate followed by an involuntary release of urine. It affects mostly people over the age of 50, and a majority of those are women.

The new treatment is called eCoin, named such because the device involved is the size of a nickel. The device is placed underneath the skin of a patient's ankle. Twice a week the eCoin sends a pulse of energy through the tibial nerve. The tibial nerve is the largest nerve in the human body, running from the foot to the spine, and is connected to the same portion of the spine as the nerves that help control the bladder. The nerve stimulation provided by eCoin helps improve bladder control, typically within four to eight weeks of placement. The benefits of the treatment can be expected to last several years before the device runs out of power and must be replaced with a new one.

David Lieber, M.D. and **Brad Holland, M.D.** are the only providers in the region offering this

urge incontinence treatment option. Besides the medical benefits of eCoin, Blessing urologists say the device is simple to place, and the treatment requires no action or effort from the patient.

Breathe easier

Bronchoscopic lung volume reduction (BLVR) can change the lives of people who struggle for each breath they take. It is a minimally invasive option for patients with severe COPD/emphysema.

For patients who qualify, BLVR places one-way valves in the diseased parts of the lung. Valves are placed using a machine called a bronchoscope, usually inserted through the nose or mouth. No incisions or cutting is required, making BLVR an alternative to the more invasive traditional lung volume reduction surgery. The valves prevent air from being trapped within the diseased area, allowing the healthier parts of the lung to function better. BLVR is usually complete in under an hour.

Pulmonologists **Umama Adil, M.D.** and **Nanjappa Somanna, M.D.** perform BLVR. ■



For more information on the care provided by Blessing Health's urology team, scan this code or go to blessinghealth.org/urology.



For more information on BLVR, scan this code or go to blessinghealth.org/blvr.

Why this fly made Tracy cry



BEFORE AND...



AFTER SURGERY



Tracy Fuqua before (left) and after surgery (right)

For most of her life, Tracy Fuqua failed one particular eye examination each time she went to the optometrist's office. It's called the Stereo Fly Test. Using the image of a house fly, the test measures the ability of both eyes to see the same object as one image, a measure of a person's depth perception.

Tracy failed the test regularly because she saw the world as flat due to an eye muscle problem that began in childhood. She had no depth perception—the ability to see things in three dimensions (length, width and depth) and to judge how far away an object was. Lack of depth perception is not only annoying, it is a safety hazard.

"If things aren't marked, like the edges of curbs and steps, and you don't have depth perception, you don't know when the curb or stairs start and end," she said.

But after more than 40 years, Tracy's life changed thanks to the unique skills of Blessing Health ophthalmologist **Senem Salar-Gomceli, M.D.**, known to her patients as Dr. Salar. Tracy tearfully remembers her first examination after undergoing surgery.

"When Dr. Salar handed me the fly test that day, I already had it in my head that I would fail," Tracy recalled. "But when she handed it to me, it looked like the fly was coming off the page. I started crying. I know I probably looked like a little girl, but I began trying to pull the fly's wings in the picture. I had never seen the fly's wings in all the times I took the test."

Tracy's outcome was rare. Most patients with her condition do not regain their depth perception, known as stereoacuity.

Why Tracy's world was flat

Tracy had strabismus, commonly known as crossed eyes. In a person with strabismus, the eyes are not lined up properly and point in different directions. In Tracy's case, her strong eye moved normally but the weak eye drifted in, toward her nose.

Tracy also had a condition called amblyopia, commonly known as "lazy eye". It is caused by a breakdown in how the brain and the eye work together. For people with amblyopia, the brain can't recognize the sight from one eye and over time relies on the stronger eye – while vision in the weaker eye gets worse. It's called "lazy eye" because the stronger eye works better.

"It always bothered me," she said. "When I talked to someone, there would be times that they did not know I was talking to them because it appeared I was not looking at them. People would ask me, 'Are you talking to me?'"

Tracy's vision gets worse

Strabismus can be treated surgically. Tracy had surgery 14 years ago when she lived in another town and was warned at the time that it was not a permanent repair. The muscle in her weak eye would weaken again at some point in her life and would require a second surgery.

That point was fall 2021. Tracy, her family and her patients (she is a nurse in the radiation oncology department of the Blessing Cancer Center) noticed her weak eye was again drifting in toward her nose.

Tracy felt she needed surgery again, and quickly. Finding a surgeon 14 years ago who performed surgery for adult strabismus was difficult. She feared the same situation this time, as her original surgeon had retired.

Tracy learned that Blessing Health was developing a Vision Center at the Blessing Health Center 4800 Maine in Quincy, and Dr. Salar was joining the Center as a founding provider. Under Dr. Salar's guidance, state-of-the-art equipment with the latest technology was purchased, and ophthalmic technicians were hired and trained with Dr. Salar. In addition, new equipment was installed at the Blessing Surgery Center for the surgical ophthalmology care of Blessing patients.

How Dr. Salar changed Tracy's life

Dr. Salar brought with her to the Blessing Vision Center special training in pediatric ophthalmology and adult strabismus. Certified by the American Board of Ophthalmology, Dr. Salar completed a fellowship at the University of Illinois in pediatric ophthalmology and adult strabismus. The American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and

Strabismus estimates only three to four of this level of specialty-trained ophthalmologists is available per million people.

"I was ecstatic," Tracy exclaimed as she prepared for surgery with Dr. Salar.

"Ocular motility disorders and adult strabismus are very interesting. It is like a puzzle, trying to figure out what exactly is going on with a patient's ocular motility and oftentimes in their brain," she said.

"Treating adult strabismus is very rewarding. I have seen so many patients in tears, just like Tracy, after their eyes are aligned. The psychological and social impact of eye misalignment on these patients' lives cannot be overestimated."

Benefits of strabismus surgery include people feeling more comfortable with their appearance when their eyes look in the same direction, and some patients report improved depth perception and increased field of vision (seeing straight ahead and to the sides).

"Dr. Salar has changed my life," Tracy said of the benefits of her surgery. "She has given me a whole new outlook, literally. The day after surgery, I cried in her exam room chair—tears of happiness of what I now knew I had been missing. We take so much for granted." ■



Senem Salar-Gomceli, M.D.



For more information on the care provided by Dr. Salar and the services of the Blessing Vision Center, scan this code, go to **blessinghealth.org/visioncenter** or call **(217) 214-0454**.

CARE EXPANSION FOR CHRONIC DISEASES

People with chronic illnesses often suffer a poor quality of life because their symptoms are difficult to manage. Blessing Health's Palliative Care team can help. The team of a doctor, nurse practitioner, registered nurse, social workers and a chaplain help people better manage the symptoms of chronic disease by addressing the medical, social and spiritual complications that can come with life-limiting, chronic diseases. Palliative care can enhance a person's quality of life and lower

their health care costs over time by reducing the need for care of symptoms.

A palliative care clinic has opened at Illini Community Hospital, Pittsfield, Illinois. Appointments are available on the second and fourth Monday of the month from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Blessing also offers palliative care in other communities it serves. For more information on palliative care or to make an appointment, call (217) 223-8440, ext. 5533.

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