



# Atrium Health

## Carolinas Rehabilitation

### Within Your Reach

WINTER 2021



#### Inside This Newsletter

- Creation of process to overturn Medicare Advantage denials
- Integration of cancer rehabilitation
- Development of state-of-the-art rehabilitation hospital
- Awards and accomplishments

# A Message From Our Leaders



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It is our great pleasure to present the winter installment of Within Your Reach, the official newsletter of Atrium Health Carolinas Rehabilitation. During these challenging times, we have remained focused on our mission to advance rehabilitation through clinical care, education and research. We are so honored to have you join us on our journey as we revolutionize rehabilitation in the Southeast!

In this issue, we start with a story of advocacy featuring Brian Moore, MD, the physician leader of utilization management here at Atrium Health. Dr. Moore has been instrumental in developing strategies and protocols that allow Medicare Advantage beneficiaries to access inpatient rehabilitation, as intended by Medicare guidelines.

This issue also includes an article that shows the power of cooperation and collaboration to improve continuity in cancer rehabilitation. Atrium Health Levine Cancer Institute and Carolinas Rehabilitation have long been recognized for excellence in clinical care, with Carolinas Rehabilitation receiving the first-ever global accreditation in cancer rehabilitation by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) for inpatient and outpatient care. Also, Levine Cancer Institute has now been named the first CARF-accredited outpatient rehabilitation program within a US cancer center.



Our third article introduces the advances and innovations of our new flagship rehabilitation hospital (#TheNewCR) and explains how this will translate into more effective and efficient patient care.

Lastly, it always brings great satisfaction to those of us in academic medicine to participate with our national and international colleagues in advocacy, education and research activities. It is also very humbling when we are recognized for this work. We have included a few recent acknowledgments and achievements that would not have been possible without the supportive and collegial members of our Department of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation team at Carolinas Rehabilitation.

We thank you again for your support and partnership and hope you enjoy this issue of Within Your Reach.



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# A Framework to Appeal Medicare Advantage Denials

When Medicare Advantage plans started denying up to 60-70% of our requests for rehabilitation care that is normally covered by Medicare, Brian Moore, MD, wouldn't take no for an answer. Dr. Moore is medical director of Utilization Management and Physician Advisor Services at Atrium Health, and he developed a process that makes it quick and easy for physicians to appeal the denials. This process has enabled hundreds of patients to access rehabilitation care that their Medicare Advantage plans initially turned down.



Brian Moore, MD

“We were seeing denials for medically necessary, inpatient rehabilitation care for people who suffered a significant stroke or spinal cord injury – people who would very easily qualify under any reasonable interpretation of the Medicare coverage criteria,” Dr. Moore says. “We needed to find a way to intervene so these people could get the care they needed.”

Dr. Moore dove into the Medicare regulations and discovered that the plans are legally required to provide a way for patients or physicians to appeal their decisions via phone or fax. He knew that most physicians weren't familiar with the complex regulations and didn't have time to

spend hours on the phone. So he developed a one-page fax template that makes it easy for physicians to appeal a claim. “All you have to do is include the patient name, their plan number, their address and the medical reason why you think they should get the care that was denied,” Dr. Moore says. “It takes about 10 minutes to fill out and fax the form.”

Current law requires plans to respond to appeals within 72 hours. If the plan upholds its denial, they are required to FedEx their decision to an Independent Review Entity designated by the federal government that monitors Medicare Advantage denials.

“Once we instituted this simple step of sending a fax, upwards of 90% of the denials were overturned by the plan, usually while the patient was still in the hospital,” Dr. Moore says.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services recently made the appeals process even easier, by allowing staff to file appeals acting on a physician's behalf. At Atrium Health Carolinas Rehabilitation, we've enlisted physician liaisons and other staff members to help physicians file appeals.

The end result: We've been able to deliver care to well over 600 patients whose requests for care were initially denied. Successfully appealing their plans' decisions meant that these patients were able to get care in our rehabilitation facility instead of a nursing home.

Dr. Moore has presented this work to the American Hospitals Association and other key national organizations. He's also working to extend use of his appeals process to benefit patients and physicians throughout Atrium Health to push back on aggressive denials.

**“By doing the right thing for patients, we're making sure they get the access to the care they require.”**

## LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW WE'RE OVERTURNING DENIALS

We recently produced a video that showcases how we're overturning Medical Advantage denials and how this is transforming the lives of our patients. You can watch the video at: [bit.ly/OverturnMedicareAdvantageDenials](https://bit.ly/OverturnMedicareAdvantageDenials).

“I couldn't walk and I was told it would be best to enter an acute rehabilitation program. But I was denied – and frightened and confused. Then my doctors went back with irrefutable evidence that I was in desperate need of an acute rehabilitation facility. It was beyond belief – everyone was determined to help me get the care I needed.”

– Atrium Health Carolinas Rehabilitation patient



This video was taken before COVID-19 mask requirements.

Dr. Moore has presented this work to the American Hospitals Association and other key national organizations. He's also working to extend use of his appeals process to benefit patients and physicians throughout Atrium Health to push back on aggressive denials.

“One lesson for physicians is: Don't be afraid that a plan won't cover what the patient needs,” Dr. Moore says. “Go ahead and request the medically appropriate care, and know that you can easily appeal a denial, usually with success.”

**600+**

More than 600 of our patients have received care after originally receiving a denial

**90%**

Our simple process has helped overturn more than 90% of denials

# Cancer Care at Atrium Health Includes a Rare Element – Fully Integrated Rehabilitation

Treatment of cancer has changed enormously in recent years. Earlier diagnosis and specialized treatments have meant that survival rates are higher than ever before, and patients are living far longer than just a few decades ago. Because of these welcome shifts, cancer care has needed to evolve to keep up – and to serve the new needs of people recovering from cancer, and living with it.

Of the 240 inpatient admissions, 77% have been discharged to the community.

Patients who experience difficulties due to their cancer or to its treatment can benefit from an integrated rehabilitation program that is not only tailored to their particular needs but also woven into acute care itself. Few care delivery models integrate comprehensive cancer rehabilitation into their care continuum like LCI and Carolinas Rehabilitation.

“LCI made a commitment to whole-person cancer care years ago,” says Declan Walsh, MD, chair of the Department of Supportive Oncology at LCI. “In addition to excellent treatment for the tumor itself, the patient also has a menu of services available as far as supportive care – cancer rehab is one of those very important services, and can include nutrition, control of symptoms, psycho-oncology, physical therapy, occupational therapy, group recreational activities and offerings from numerous other disciplines. We also have a recently opened state-of-the-art outpatient gym.”



Declan Walsh, MD

And evolved it has. Atrium Health Levine Cancer Institute (LCI), ranked among the nation's best by U.S. News & World Report, and Atrium Health Carolinas Rehabilitation work in close collaboration to provide patients with world-class multidisciplinary cancer rehabilitation in both the inpatient and outpatient settings. Rehab experts specializing in cancer, and a medley of experts from neuropsychologists to speech therapists, are there to support patients as they navigate treatment and recovery.

The data speaks clearly: In 2020, the cancer rehab program saw 3,000 outpatient visits – 86% of therapy patients had a clinically significant gain in function.



**3,000**

Outpatient visits in 2020

**86%**

In 2020, 86% of therapy patients had a clinically significant gain in function

**77%**

Fully 77% of 2020 inpatient admissions to the cancer rehabilitation program have been discharged to the community

## BLURRED LINES MEAN BETTER CARE

Sometimes it's difficult to determine where acute care ends and rehab begins – and this is just as it should be. “The concept is that lines are blurred because the care is so integrated,” says Vishwa Raj, MD, medical director at Carolinas Rehabilitation and chief of cancer rehabilitation at LCI. “In places where it's not coordinated as well, staff may say they can't handle needs, because they don't have the resources or collaborations. Here at LCI, and Carolinas Rehabilitation, there is full and seamless continuity of care in the different settings. We can often treat in rehab what others would treat in acute care.”

The cancer rehabilitation program has even earned a prestigious accreditation by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) – a first for a cancer rehab program not just in the country but in the world. Programs have been accredited both within Carolinas Rehabilitation and LCI.

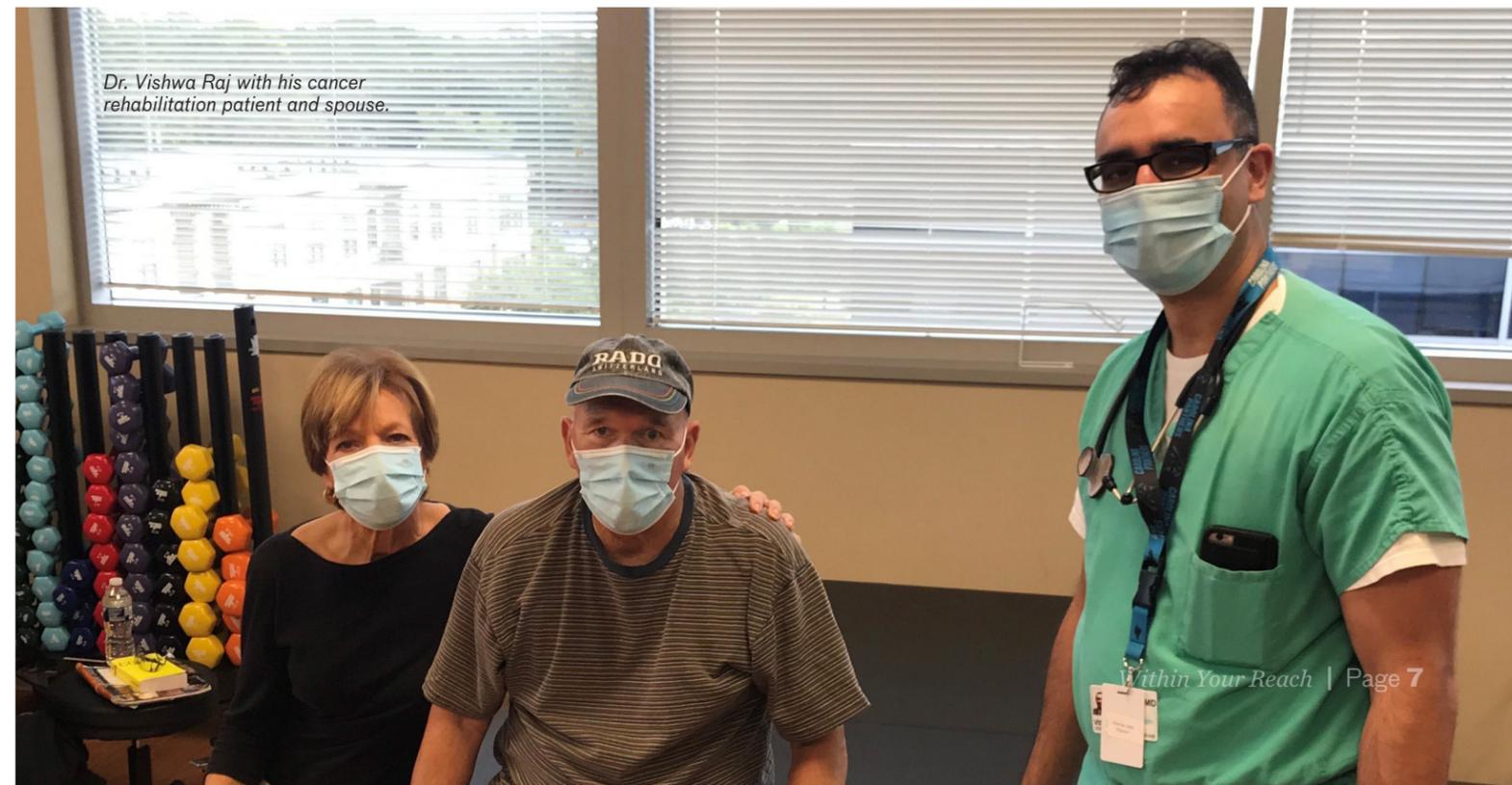
The faculty see the program expanding in the coming years and serving more patients across a greater swath of the area.

“The patient population will grow, and we'll respond,” says Dr. Raj. “In addition, we're setting a precedent for how to deliver cancer care in the future. Our data shows why programs like this need to be supported at the state and federal levels. Our model will illustrate how to develop and implement care in a fiscally responsible manner, while supporting maximum patient access and the best possible outcomes for patients and their families.”



Vishwa Raj, MD

To learn more about our cancer rehabilitation program, please email Dr. Walsh at [Declan.Walsh@AtriumHealth.org](mailto:Declan.Walsh@AtriumHealth.org) and/or Dr. Raj at [Vishwa.Raj@AtriumHealth.org](mailto:Vishwa.Raj@AtriumHealth.org).



Dr. Vishwa Raj with his cancer rehabilitation patient and spouse.



## An Inside Look at Our Innovative New Hospital

We recently broke ground on Atrium Health Carolinas Rehabilitation - Charlotte, a cutting-edge hospital that will bring advanced rehabilitation programs and services to patients throughout the Carolinas and the Southeastern United States. We partnered with the renowned architecture firm NBBJ to create a design that promotes holistic health and wellness of patients and staff; facilitates use of the latest therapeutic techniques and technologies; and empowers patients and families on their path toward independence. Here's an inside look at what will set the hospital apart:

### INSPIRATION FROM COMMUNITY AND NATURE



Every unit in the hospital will support robust therapy and day activity programs while bringing patients and families together with other people facing similar challenges. This will create a community that supports patients and helps them find inspiration as they work toward brighter, more independent futures. Each patient's rehabilitation journey will be fueled by a connection to nature: The building was intentionally situated to provide views of the adjacent creek and green spaces, with large windows that provide generous daylight.

## COMPREHENSIVE THERAPY SUITES



The new therapy suites will feature the latest technology and are designed for shared use by inpatients and outpatients. These suites will include one of the region's most advanced therapy gyms, an outdoor therapy garden, an aquatic therapy pool and a Center for Independent Living to help patients relearn activities for daily life.

## ADAPTABLE INPATIENT ROOMS



The private inpatient rooms are designed to be adaptable, so we can continually evolve care as new techniques and technologies emerge. The rooms are also standardized and identical, enabling cross-training of care teams and increased staffing flexibility.

## CONVENIENT, COLLABORATIVE CARE



The inpatient unit design is based on an innovative, "open core" layout that includes:

- 16-foot-wide corridors
- Team workstations that are distributed across the unit, making it easier for patients and providers to stay connected
- Quiet gyms and treatment areas that enable patients to access therapy close to their rooms while helping physicians, nurses and therapists to collaborate and coordinate

## A TOP-25 REHABILITATION HOSPITAL

This state-of-the-art hospital is the latest milestone in our quest to provide the world's best rehabilitative care – a commitment that has led to Atrium Health Carolinas Rehabilitation being listed with a rehabilitation score that puts it among the nation's top 25 rehabilitation hospitals by U.S. News & World Report for the past 7 years.



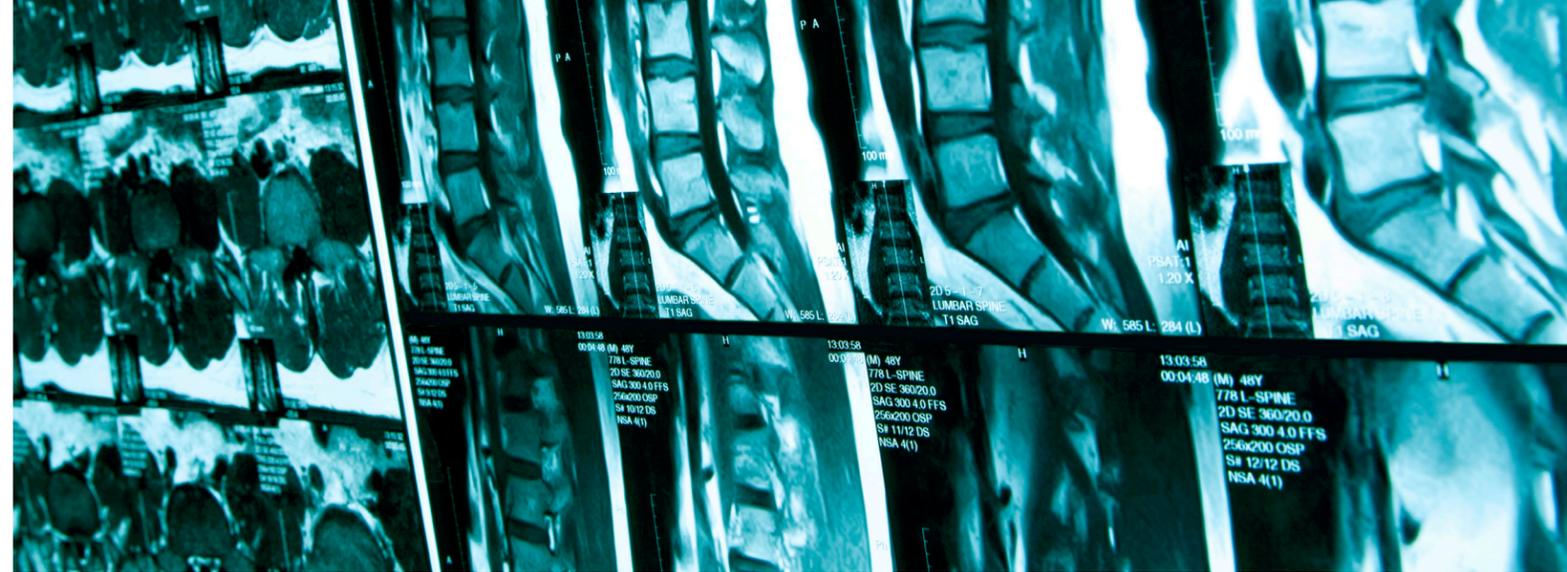
# William Bockenek, MD, Awarded for Exceptional Care

William Bockenek, MD, was honored to be recognized by the American Paraplegia Society (APS) and the Academy of Spinal Cord Injury Professionals (ASCIP) in 2020, when he received the Estin Comarr Award for Distinguished Clinical Service. Dr. Bockenek is chief medical officer at Atrium Health Carolinas Rehabilitation and chair of the Department of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation at Atrium Health Carolinas Medical Center.



**William Bockenek, MD**

The Estin Comarr Award is given to an APS/ASCIP member who has made significant contributions to spinal cord medicine and demonstrated exceptional accomplishments in patient care. Dr. Bockenek served as vice chair of the ASCIP and president of the APS from 2009-2011. For the last 30 years, Dr. Bockenek has dedicated his career to the care of people with spinal cord injuries.



Since his arrival at Carolinas Rehabilitation in 1991, Dr. Bockenek has served in numerous administrative roles locally and nationally related to people with spinal cord injuries. These roles include director of spinal cord injury services at Atrium Health Carolinas Rehabilitation from 1991-2005; board member/leadership roles in the APS, ASCIP and the American Spinal Injury Association; and chair of the Spinal Cord Injury Medicine Exam Committee for the American Board of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation.

Though he has enjoyed the opportunity to improve the lives of people with spinal cord injuries through his involvement in these organizations, his greatest joy comes from providing care to his spinal cord injury patients within his role as a clinician at Carolinas Rehabilitation.



*This photo was taken before COVID-19 mask requirements.*  
 Jeff Johns, MD, William Bockenek, MD, Larry Vogel, MD, Sunil Sabharwal, MD, and Michael Kennelly, MD (from left to right)

# New Leadership Positions and Research Grants for Vu Nguyen, MD

In 2020, Vu Nguyen, MD, achieved several milestones that reflect how Atrium Health Carolinas Rehabilitation has established itself as a world leader in providing and improving rehabilitation care.

Dr. Nguyen was selected to be 1 of 15 directors of the American Board of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation and named as a member of the World Health Organization's working group on Parkinson's disease. Dr. Nguyen's participation in these institutions reflects our endeavor to craft the standards for evidence-based care and our dedication to providing the highest level of care for patients.



*Vu Nguyen, MD*

Dr. Nguyen also received 2 NIH RO1 subawards as the site principal investigator for his ongoing research on stroke rehabilitation.

"Our goal is to continually improve care for all rehabilitation patients," Dr. Nguyen says, "and we're proud to be recognized for driving innovation and state-of-the-art research."

## 1 of 15

*Dr. Nguyen was selected to be 1 of 15 directors of the American Board of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*

