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Ricky Gray's amazing ECMO journey

In September of 2022, Ricky Gray completed the Ironman Wisconsin triathlon. Ricky was one of about 1,000 competitors who finished the course. It took him 15 hours and 48 minutes. "My family and friends kept me going," says Ricky. "They knew how far I'd come with my recovery and training."

But there was something more besides the satisfaction of completing a full Ironman triathlon. What fueled Ricky was a life-changing event two years earlier, one that served as its own medical triathlon: Thirty-one days of arduous life and death drama at Legacy Emanuel Medical Center, including care from the hospital's Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO) team.

In 2019, Ricky fell from a 10-foot ladder and suffered a right pelvic dislocation and a hip fracture. He was taken to Legacy Emanuel, where he was stabilized and had surgery to rebuild his hip socket. The reconstruction went well, but Ricky's oxygen level fell coming out of surgery. Both his lungs eventually developed huge clots.

Over the next two days, Ricky experienced a gamut of health challenges: internal bleeding, clots and swelling at the surgical site. During a follow-up surgery, Ricky aspirated, adding to a downhill spiral. Ricky was fighting for his life. He was given a five percent chance of survival.

That is where ECMO came in. ECMO technology entirely supports a patient's heart or lungs when they cannot function on their own. It is used in certain life-threatening situations to oxygenate and circulate blood. Legacy Emanuel is a leader in ECMO and recently earned distinction as a Platinum Center of Excellence by the Extracorporeal Life Support Organization. The designation is awarded to less than 50 medical centers around the world.

Being on ECMO would give Ricky a 50 percent chance of survival. His condition improved bit by bit, with smaller procedures happening as needed. After a week he was removed from the ECMO machine and switched to a regular ventilator. Ricky would improve enough in the next two weeks to move to a rehabilitation facility for further physical and occupational therapy, and eventually return home.

Everything that happened to Ricky in the fall of 2019 prepared him for the Ironman triathlon in Wisconsin in 2022. Like the gradual steps of his recovery, his athletic training started slowly: Some walking, then running, then more running, and then training with a bike and swimming.

There's more competition in Ricky's future: he was invited to enter the Ironman in Nice, France this fall. Looking back with the spirit of an ironman and the heart and will of a true survivor, Ricky has found a nice way to sum up the past few years: "I was never going to give up."



We are caretakers, life changers, and even life savers. We are warriors of wellness and proponents of positive impacts. We are shaping a better world for today and all the days that follow. And, importantly, so are every one of our generous donors.

These stories highlight a few programs supported by philanthropy that are improving the health of our communities.



See Ricky and his wife Sharon tell their story about his ECMO experience.



Study shows promise for endometrial cancer treatment



The Legacy Health Cancer Institute participated in a recent medical trial which provides hope to women with endometrial cancer. Data from the trial, run by the National Cancer Institute, shows significant improvement in stalling cancer growth by adding an immunotherapy agent called pembrolizumab to chemotherapy treatment.

"Patients with advanced or recurrent endometrial cancer face a poor prognosis with few treatment options, so the finding of this trial brings a lot of

excitement and hope for our patients. Especially in the face of news that endometrial cancers are more common and more deadly than before," says Dr. Gina Westhoff, a Legacy Health gynecologic oncologist.

Jennifer Lanier, a professional trainer who identifies as Black and Native American, was diagnosed with endometrial cancer in 2020. She was too late to participate in the clinical trial but did undergo a hysterectomy and radiation treatment. In 2022, when her cancer came back with a vengeance, she was one of the women who benefited from the trial's early positive results and received pembrolizumab with her chemotherapy.



"I'm grateful for my health clinic that understands women of color and fortunate for their relationship with Legacy Cancer Institute," says Jennifer. "My body said something was wrong. Now, I empower other women of color, and all women to speak up about unusual symptoms and go to the doctor. The worst thing that could happen is the doctor will say you're fine."

Women should be aware of specific symptoms because survival rates are higher when detected early. "If women are experiencing irregular or heavy menstrual bleeding, postmenopausal bleeding, or persistent pelvic pain, that's worrisome, and a doctor should see them," says Dr. Westhoff.

"I can't stress enough that education and awareness about the symptoms of endometrial cancer are crucial to saving lives, particularly within marginalized communities of color. Women need to know early signs and symptoms and get treated early. Time can make a difference."

Dr. Westhoff says the results of the study provide hope and survival to many women battling advanced endometrial cancers by offering more and better treatment options. "Patients are living longer with their cancer under control, which is a huge win."



Swimming upstream: addressing food insecurity

Recently, a young woman walked into the midwifery clinic at Legacy Emanuel Medical Center for a prenatal check. She had just migrated to Oregon from Haiti by way of Brazil and Mexico. She was exhausted, 33 weeks pregnant, a soon-to-be single mother.

A screening conducted by Legacy Health staff revealed that the young woman was also suffering from food insecurity issues. She didn't have a source of income, either.

The dire situation isn't a rarity. Increasingly, Legacy staff are encountering patients with food insecurity and other social needs impacting their health. Many patients experiencing these issues are not recent migrants, but long-time local residents with jobs.

"We are seeing a lot of these situations," says Beth Barnhart, a social worker at the midwifery clinic. "A combination of factors are responsible: COVID, inflation. The cost of living is expensive now. For people who are working, it's harder to just get by."

Legacy Research Institute scientist Megan Cahn, PhD, MPH, says food insecurity and related issues highlight a dilemma health care systems increasingly face. What role do they have in solving the social and economic problems that determine the health of their patients?

"Food, jobs and housing have traditionally not been in the purview of health systems," says Cahn. "But what happens when there's an impact on the health of patients? The health and well-being of our patients is what matters. But health systems, historically, haven't been set up to deal with those issues."

After prenatal treatment, the young Haitian woman was connected to the Oregon Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. She was also given a food bag through an existing Legacy program that provides food to patients in need. Barnhart says that since the young woman is getting prenatal care at Legacy, staff will see her every few weeks and will continue to give her food bags.

Cahn says providing food and connections to programs are critical and necessary. But health systems eventually want to take more proactive steps.

"Providing food bags and connecting patients to programs amount to 'downstream' activity," she says. "How can we make an impact that is further 'upstream'— putting in place systems and other programs that help prevent people from ending up food insecure?"

That's the puzzle to solve in the future, says Cahn, who has been analyzing health equity issues for many years, including seven at Legacy. Cahn says health systems must rightly prioritize medical care. But rising inflation has made food insecurity, housing and other symptoms of inequity difficult to ignore.

"There are big questions here about equity and the health system's role in addressing social issues. These issues reach beyond our patients' health. They affect our staff, some of whom are also personally experiencing these issues, and impact the way they work with patients. But Legacy's awareness of these questions and investments in DEI and population health give me confidence that we're making meaningful headway in addressing patient and staff social health needs."