HEARTACHE SPURS UNDERSTANDING
MOM FURTHERS TUMOR RESEARCH IN SON'S NAME
BY CHUCK STARESINIC

Nick Wichman of Ellicott City, Md., was 7 years old when he complained to his parents of a stomachache. Seven weeks later, just after his eighth birthday, he was dead. A malignant glioma, among the deadliest of brain tumors, killed him. There was little anyone could have done.

Nick’s family announced that, in lieu of flowers, friends and family could donate to a fund in his name. Nothing causes an outpouring of grief like the death of a child. A week later, the Witchmans had to figure out what to do with several thousand dollars. They wanted to support research that would help other boys and girls recover, so they held fundraisers and accepted donations from people moved by the plight of children with brain tumors. Within a year, the Nick Eric Wichman Foundation was ready to give a grant of $40,000 to support medical research.

But Karen Wichman, Nick’s mother and a 1985 legal studies graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, almost gave up when she approached a renowned neurosurgeon in another state who seemed interested only in finding out whether there was more money beyond the 40 K. “Worst day of my life,” she says. “Worse than when my son died.” He made her feel like she and her son weren’t important unless they were relatives of Bill Gates. That money came from kids with lemonade stands, she says now, barely suppressing her anger. “When a woman gives me a thousand dollars and says, ‘I want you to have this,’ and her husband doesn’t even have a job, I know it matters.”

In February of 2002, a friend e-mailed her an article from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette—“Study finds clue to deadly childhood brain cancers.” The article described how Ian Pollack, chief of pediatric neurosurgery at Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh and Pitt’s Walter E. Dandy Professor of Neurosurgery, had led a study that found a protein that was highly expressed in the deadliest pediatric brain tumors. The discovery offered some hope for better diagnosis and treatment. Perhaps inhibiting the protein would make tumors less deadly.

The foundation asked Pollack to submit a proposal, which eventually was selected for the first of its annual $40,000 grants. Wichman, who has visited Pollack several times, was moved by his commitment to patients and to long-term research.

In each year since, the annual grant has supported Pollack’s work with Marie Beckner, research assistant professor in the Department of Pathology. The two are trying to understand the sort of process that killed Nick—the invasive migration of tumor cells into healthy tissue, which is different from a tumor that presses against, but is essentially separate from, nearby tissue. In a recent paper, the Pitt collaborators identified, in vitro, the rich assemblage of proteins that make up the leading edge of a tumor cell—a pseudopod—as it protrudes through a small opening in search of fertile territory. Understanding the pseudopod’s makeup, says Beckner, is the first step to stopping it.

Beckner adds that the foundation’s support is absolutely invaluable, because though there are lots of research dollars for studying proliferation or other aspects of tumor cell behavior, there is little funding directed specifically to tumor cell migration.

“Just a mom with a broken heart,” says Wichman. “I don’t want anyone else to go through this.”

BOOSTER SHOTS

Each August, the Medical Alumni Association, with help from generous alumni and with great ceremony, presents entering Pitt med students with white coats, marking their entry into the hallowed realm of medical apprenticeship. In response to overwhelming demand from students, there was one difference this year in the coats themselves—bigger and better pockets. We were moved to ask the question: Now that students have publicly declared their intention to pursue the medical profession with integrity and honor, what have they got in those pockets?

Our poll revealed these ample pockets are where students store tools of the trade (at least that’s what they told us): stethoscopes, oto-ophthalmoscopes, reflex hammers, penlights, Bates’ Pocket Guide to Physical Examination and History Taking. One student confessed her stethoscope rarely sees the inside of her pockets because she enjoys having it around her neck so much—a reminder that she is on her way to becoming a doctor. Other intelligence reveals that personal items—including hair ties, cough drops, and tissues—are filling said pockets. And one student, clearly too busy studying to do laundry, admitted that the only thing in his white coat, which is hanging in his anatomy locker, is a strong and pervasive odor.

Of the more than a million HIV-positive people in Kenya, 100,000 are children. The Kenyan Pediatric HIV Project, run by first- and second-year Pitt med students, intends to work with Kenyan groups providing medicine and clinical care to infected children. Founder Kate Dickman (Class of ’07) and other students are now raising money to acquire antiretroviral medicine for infected children and for an assessment trip in June. They recently received news that the dean’s office will match any donations from School of Medicine faculty. —Jen Dionisio

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE KENYAN PROJECT: www.pittmed.pitt.edu/KPHP
RE OTHER GIVING OPPORTUNITIES: 1-800-MED-ALUM