



Leading oncologist takes on new role at proton facility

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GAINESVILLE, Fla. — A nationally known oncologist who served as a University of Florida department chairwoman for 13 years has been named medical director of the university's new proton therapy institute in Jacksonville, UF College of Medicine officials have announced.

Nancy Mendenhall, M.D., has left her post as chairwoman of the college's radiation oncology department in Gainesville to lead medical operations at the new facility, which will offer a more precise form of radiation that could reduce the risk of complications and improve cure rates in cancer patients when it opens later this year.

Using protons to combat tumors allows doctors to treat cancer more aggressively because they can apply a higher dose of radiation than they would with conventional therapy. The tightly focused treatment targets malignancies, yet inflicts little damage on surrounding tissues. As a result, many patients experience fewer side effects. Only three other centers in the country offer this form of therapy.

"I am so excited about this," Mendenhall said. "I've always liked every job that I have had, but I think I am most excited about this. What we envision is a maximally efficient clinical and research operation to investigate the best use of protons and proton therapy."

Mendenhall, who first suggested the idea of UF building a proton therapy center in 1998, also will serve as associate chairwoman of the radiation oncology department in Jacksonville.

"Dr. Mendenhall was the inspiration behind the development of the proton beam therapy facility on our Jacksonville campus," said C. Craig Tisher, M.D., dean of the College of Medicine. "She has now accepted the challenge to prepare the facility to begin patient treatments in mid-2006 in her new role as its medical director."

(MORE)

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Robert J. Amdur, M.D., has been named interim chairman of the radiation oncology department in Gainesville.

Mendenhall first came to UF as an undergraduate transfer from the University of Texas. She stayed at the university for medical school after earning a degree in English and also completed her internship and residency here.

It was during her internship that Mendenhall, who had toyed with pursuing a career in tropical medicine or surgery, developed a passion for the field of radiation oncology.

“I had an internship set up with all these pathology rotations, aimed at ultimately going into surgery, and that first week in radiation oncology, I just knew it,” she said. “It was everything I wanted.”

Mendenhall joined the UF faculty in 1984 as an assistant professor. She was named chairman of the radiation oncology department in 1992 and earned the rank of full professor two years later.

She has specialized in lymphoma, Hodgkin’s disease, breast cancer, and pediatric malignancies and has helped set national protocols for the treatment of childhood cancer while serving on national children’s oncology cooperative research groups.

Mendenhall has been recognized as a top doctor in Good Housekeeping, Redbook and The Ladies’ Home Journal and has made the list of “The Best Cancer Doctors in America” four times.

When she was named chairwoman in 1992, Mendenhall hoped to strengthen clinical research in the radiation oncology department, build on its physics program and start a cancer biology program, goals she accomplished during her tenure.

“During her chairmanship the department has achieved both a national and international reputation for the quality of its clinical and research programs,” Tisher said. “It is especially well-known for the management of patients with head and neck cancers, breast cancer and malignancies affecting pediatric patients.”

But Mendenhall particularly relishes the chance to help establish the proton therapy institute, a facility she believes will dramatically improve treatment for cancer patients. After initially suggesting the idea, she also served on the facility’s steering committee.

“We’ve accumulated experience over the years, and technology, to create from the ground level a product that will be better than anything we have had in the past,” she said.

