40 Years of Restoring Abilities and Rebuilding Lives

Fresh out of physical therapy school in 1978, Leslie Irwin decided to apply for a job in Knoxville. Her interview included a tour of a brand new rehabilitation facility being built within the walls of Fort Sanders Hospital.

Now administrator of Patricia Neal Rehabilitation Center at Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center, Irwin looks back 40 years to the beginning of what became one of the most comprehensive rehab facilities in the region, recognized nationally for excellence in clinical outcomes and the highest levels of patient satisfaction.

PNRC was primarily developed to give local patients a place to recover during a time when they were being transferred to other states for rehabilitation. No one knew then that patients would eventually come to the center from other areas of the state, across the nation, and around the world.

Patricia Neal Rehabilitation Center stands strong because some things never change.

The best interests of the patient and the patient’s family still come first. And the center relies on the continued commitment of therapists, nurses, and medical staff, Fort Sanders and Covenant Health leaders, the Fort Sanders Foundation, donors and valued corporate partners.

Jennifer Steely, director of clinical services, joined PNRC in 1995. Steely says many of the center’s employees have been on staff for 20 years or more.

“It may be uncommon in the general work force of the world, but it’s not uncommon here,” Steely says.

PNRC offers a hospital level of care.

The physicians are physical medicine and rehabilitation specialists. They lead the rest of the team that helps patients become more independent, whether that means tasks as simple as being able to brush their own teeth or as complicated as driving a car.

Mary Dillon, MD, has been medical director of PNRC since 2003. She and other physician specialists provide medical care for patients, and she refers to the rehabilitation physicians and staff as a team of people who have “a calling” for what they do.

Dr. Dillon is proud of the many awards the Patricia Neal Rehabilitation Center has received over the years. “As a staff, our goal is to provide the best care and to constantly look for ways to improve the patient’s experience—the kind of care we would want for our own families and loved ones.”

At Patricia Neal Rehabilitation Center, the goal is to restore patients’ quality of life, sometimes after the patients themselves weren’t certain they could even survive. Irwin says it was exciting to treat the very first patients in 1978, but being at PNRC now is even better.

“We’ve been here now for 40 years. The center is vibrant and we take such great pride in the accomplishments of the staff, which ultimately lead to the accomplishments of the patients and their families,” Irwin says. “It’s the result of commitment and the unwavering, unrelenting focus on patient care. The patients are always going to come first.”

From left: Leslie Irwin, administrator; Dr. Mary Dillon, medical director; Jennifer Steely, director of clinical services
A New Look For the Patient Apartment

In 2019, PNRC celebrated the reopening of the patient apartment, newly renovated through the generosity of Clayton and the Fort Sanders Foundation. The patient apartment is used to ease the transition back to everyday life following serious injury or stroke. PNRC is the only rehabilitation center in the area with a rehabilitation apartment. The 598-square feet apartment has a fully equipped kitchen, bathroom, and living space and has several adaptable features including easy-turn faucets, drop-down kitchen cabinetry, and grab bars.

Welcome Dr. Fisher and Dr. Hartman

We are proud to welcome Dr. Fisher and Dr. Hartman to the Patricia Neal team.

Brandon Fisher, DO
Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation
Residency: Larkin Community Hospital
Medical School: DeBusk College of Osteopathic Medicine

Eric Hartman, MD
Board Certified in Brain Injury Rehabilitation and Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation
Fellowship: Traumatic Brain Injury Rehabilitation, Baylor College of Medicine
Residency: Baylor College of Medicine
Medical School: St. George’s University School of Medicine
Inpatient
At Patricia Neal, physical, occupational, recreational, behavioral medicine, and speech-language therapists work with rehabilitation physicians to develop individual plans of care for each patient. Additionally, rehabilitation nurses work with patients and their families teaching self-care techniques and providing education, thereby helping patients restore their abilities and rebuild their lives.

Outpatient
Patricia Neal Outpatient Clinic (PNOC) is a dynamic part of the rehabilitation spectrum of care for those patients who have completed our inpatient programs and for those who have been referred by other health care providers. PNOC is available for a short course of treatment after an injury and for additional care as needed as abilities change with the aging process.

PNOC has physical occupational, speech-language, and behavioral medicine therapies available. Using a team approach, the therapists work with patients and their families to improve function according to each patient’s individualized goals.

PNOC provides rehabilitation services for adults and adolescents including but not limited to
• Spinal cord injuries
• Amputations
• Multiple traumas
• General neurological diagnoses
• Stroke
• Brain Injury
• Parkinson’s Disease
• Multiple Sclerosis
• Post-Concussive

Additionally, specialty services include:
• Assistive Technology
  ▸ Augmentative Communication
  ▸ Specialized Wheelchair Seating and Mobility
• Comprehensive Driving Education and Rehabilitation
• Neuropsychological Evaluations
• Balance and Vestibular Rehabilitation
• Prosthetic Training
2018 Facts and Figures

Admissions:

600 Total admissions

- Stroke - 346
- Brain Injury - 94
- Spinal Cord Injury - 63
- Lower Extremity Amputation - 18
- Neurological Disorders - 21
- Debility - 18
- Other - 40

Patient Satisfaction:

- 94.5% patients were satisfied with their care
- 96% patients surveyed stated their rehabilitation experience improved their quality of life

Age Breakdown for Inpatient Stays:

- > 86 years: 40
- 66-85: 301
- 41-65: 205
- 18-40: 48
- 13-17: 6

CARF

10 Number of Commission on Accreditation for Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) accreditations PNRC has earned for rehab services
The Patricia Neal Innovative Recreation Cooperative (IRC) was created in 1994 to meet the needs of individuals who have suffered a life changing illness or injury in East Tennessee. Patients primarily served by the IRC include those with brain and spinal injury, stroke, neurological impairment and orthopedic injuries including amputation. The IRC regularly hosts clinics in water skiing, snow skiing, paddling, cycling, climbing, marksmanship, and golf.

We Believe

• Play is an instrumental and fundamental need of all people.

• The tangential effects of recreation promote and provide health and wellness.

• It is the right of all to participate in leisure.

Community Outreach

• Brain Injury Community Services
• HABIT Therapy Animal Program
• Innovative Recreation Cooperative (IRC)
• Joni and Friends
• Support Groups
• “Think First”
Greeting guests as he strolls amid linen-covered tables, Hubert Smith commands the room. His Motley Crew lunch, a long-standing popular community gathering, draws a crowd every month.

You would never know his secret if he chose not to share it. Smith, 65, is recovering from a stroke. “I can put my cane away and no one can tell,” Smith says. He is still working on regaining full use of his left side, and getting his full cognitive ability back.

As he sits next to Melanie DeWitt, a PNRC certified brain injury specialist and physical therapist, he shares his hope of a full recovery.

Waiting to recover

Smith was hospitalized for a full 10 days in December 2018. It took a long time to find the exact source of his stroke and by the time a clot had been discovered in the medulla of his brain stem, he had almost completely lost the use of his left side.

Lying in the hospital bed day after day, Smith repeatedly strained to touch the fingers on his left hand to his thumb, one at a time. Being able to do that gave him hope that someday he might enjoy true quality of life again.

Rather than discharging him to a skilled nursing facility, his doctor believed Smith would be a good candidate for Patricia Neal Rehabilitation Center.

A comprehensive approach

“We look at the body as a whole and where the missing pieces are, and then we work on getting those pieces back together,” DeWitt says. “Whether it’s lost range of motion or loss of active movement; whether it’s weakness, loss of coordination, loss of motor control or balance skills.”

The first time Smith sat down with a physical therapist at PNRC, he was given a container of pegs to place in holes on a board. It was easy to do with his right hand, but using his left hand was a different story.

I could not pick up one peg out of that whole container and put it in a hole, Smith says. I had a big dose of humility and realized the kind of shape I was in.

Getting his life back

At that moment, Smith made a commitment to do whatever the therapists told him to do. He would religiously follow their instructions when in therapy, and then follow the home exercises he was assigned.

Smith spent two weeks at PNRC and then transitioned to regular appointments in the outpatient therapy center.

With hard work, a good attitude, and the skill of therapists at PNRC, Smith’s improvement has been dramatic. He has gone from a hospital bed to a wheelchair and from a wheelchair to going anywhere he wants with only a cane for help.

For DeWitt, seeing a patient like Smith is the payoff for a life invested in serving others.

“That’s why I chose this profession,” DeWitt says. “I’m not going to change the world, but I can impact one person at a time with my work.”
Brent Kennedy was lying in a hospital bed unable to move or speak when he heard something he probably wasn’t supposed to hear.

“I heard doctors say I had no chance,” Brent says.

Brent had a brain bleed and a stroke – and a choice to make. He could give up or he could fight to live.

“They didn’t expect him to survive, but he fooled everybody,” says his wife, Robyn. “I just kept saying, ‘You don’t know Brent Kennedy. He’s not going to give up.’”

When Robyn took her husband to Patricia Neal Rehabilitation Center in 2006, he had already been treated at five other hospitals.

“It was the first place I felt loved,” Brent says.

Brent had been a writer, a musician, and a public speaker with a PhD in mass communications, but he was trapped in his body. When he came to PNRC he could only express himself with the blink of an eye or a nod of his head.

“The commitment to him from every facet of therapy was absolutely incredible,” Robyn says. “Being at Patricia Neal was when everything started turning around for him.”

Speech-language pathologist Mary Margaret Preston, MA, CCC-SLP, provided the key to unlocking Brent’s gateway to communication. But she won’t take full credit, because the team approach at Patricia Neal is the key to success for every patient.

Brent’s wheelchair was mounted with a device that talks for him when he taps letters on a screen. The combination of therapy and technology has been life changing for him.

Brent isn’t isolated anymore. He can now let the rest of the world know that he’s still the same smart and funny person he’s always been.
Jim Dallery Finds Help After Life Changing Fall

The next time Jim Dallery sees Cher Sanders he might not know her. But, right now, he knows exactly who she is. She’s the speech language pathologist who helped him after a rare traumatic brain injury called acquired prosopagnosia or “face blindness.”

Face blindness is the inability to recognize faces – even those of family and close friends. Up to 2.5 percent of the population are believed to be born with it. But prosopagnosia caused by stroke or injury to the brain is so rare one researcher believes there are only 20 known cases in the U.S.

“Everything Jim was before – outgoing, extroverted, remembered every name and face – he was now just the opposite,” said his wife, Tamara Dallery, adding that he lost about 20 years of memories. “Even at home, Jim couldn’t figure out who we were.”

Sanders was the first person to suspect facial blindness. When a neuropsychologist confirmed her suspicions, the Dalleries had an answer, despite there being no “cure” for facial blindness.

Instead, Sanders taught him how to cope by closely studying someone’s face and learning cues such as gait, tone of voice, and context.

Today, about 80 percent of his memory has returned, and Dallery is grateful to Sanders. “I want you to know that I will spend the first billion years of eternity thanking you for what you did,” he told her. “I’m getting my life back, and I will get my life back by the grace of God. But again, I want to emphasize, this really isn’t about us, this is about what Patricia Neal has done for us. We’re just one of many stories. But by the grace of God, we are a success story.”

From left: Speech-language pathologist Cher Sanders, Jim Dallery, and his wife Tamara Dallery.
Patricia Neal Rehabilitation Center is very fortunate to have the support of many generous individual, corporate and foundation donors. Our contributions are managed by the Fort Sanders Foundation, which coordinates fund-raising events and campaigns for our many programs and services. Over the past 40 years, millions of dollars have been raised in support of PNRC to help us provide excellent care for our patients.

To make a contribution, please call 865-531-5210.