

SICKKIDS



Myles Davis belongs to a SickKids Survivor Clinic of about 600 kids who have been treated at hospital for cancer. The clinic allows hospital staff to keep track of how the patients are doing.

PAUL IRISH PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

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An expanding club of cancer survivors

Clinic's multi-discipline team monitors for side-effects, relapses

PAUL IRISH
STAFF REPORTER

Remember the past! But don't let it hold you down! Above all, keep moving forward!

This is how Myles Davis, 14, says he lives each and every day of his life.

Cancer-free for 10 years, he's being monitored by a program at SickKids that will help ensure his road to adulthood has as few stumbling blocks as possible.

Called the Survivor Clinic, it relies on a multidisciplinary team — including nurses, oncologists, a pediatrician, a dietician, a neuropsychologist and other professionals — to keep tabs on the health of the Mississauga teenager, as well as 600 other former cancer patients.

Clinic participants are educated about the signs of relapse, monitored for long-term side-effects and guided into a lifestyle to make them proactive about their health.

Once they become adults, they transfer to Princess Margaret Hospital, where the monitoring continues.

"It's good to know it's here," says Myles. "SickKids has helped me a lot, I know that for sure."

In the 1970s, children diagnosed with cancer had a mere 20 to 30 per cent survival rate. Today, that has increased to 82 per cent.

Health professionals give credit to more sophisticated and targeted chemotherapy and radiation treatments, along with the aggressive research of the past three decades.

There are also better ways to deal with treatment side-effects, such as nausea, fever, infection and vomiting.

An after-care program was started at SickKids in the mid-1980s. But it wasn't until 2001 that the current clinic, overseen by the Pediatric Oncology Group of Ontario, really blossomed.

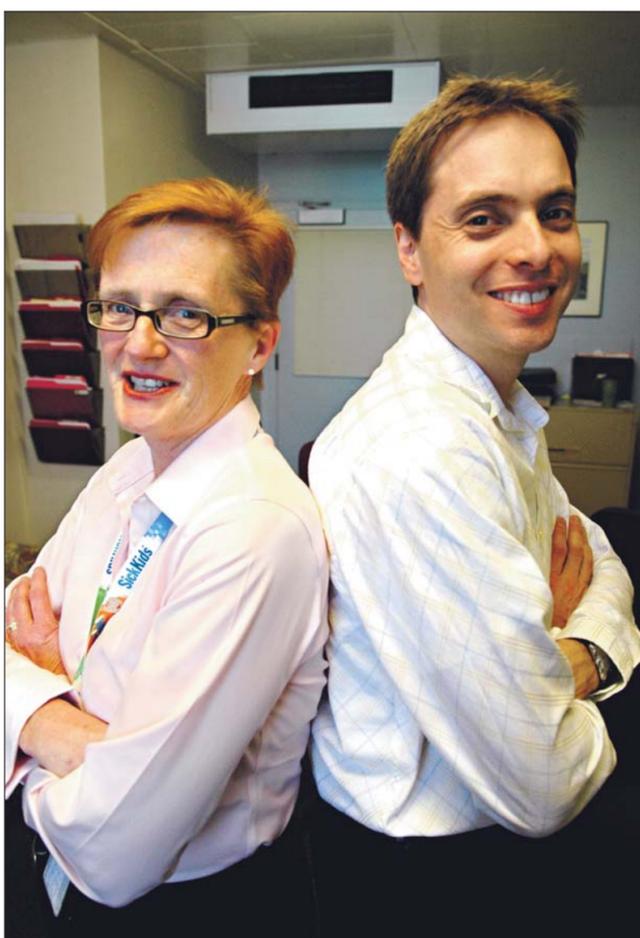
Dr. Paul Nathan, a staff oncologist who works in the clinic, says the way cancer cases are handled has come a long way.

He says it used to be a desperate bid to simply save the child's life. But now that so many more kids are surviving, doctors and researchers are working on ways to further increase their life expectancy.

Nathan says the news is good and getting better, but it's still too early to let their guard down. Even when survivors reach the five-year cancer-free milestone, they must remain vigilant because the disease can return.

As well, the cancer treatments themselves can have long-term side effects reaching right into adulthood.

The main goals of the survivor clinic are to catch any abnormalities or signs of relapse, document the long-term effects of pediatric cancer and initiate additional treatment when necessary.



Nurse Patricia Staneland and oncologist Paul Nathan are part of the Survivor Clinic team that monitors former cancer patients at SickKids.

"Survivorship is a very, very important chapter in this book," says Nathan. "The story goes on a long time after the child leaves the hospital."

Nurse Pat Staneland has been working with cancer patients at SickKids for 28 years and is proud of the clinic's holistic approach, which includes tending to the emotional and psychological well-being of patients.

"Obviously, it is a difficult time for the kids," she says. "Even when they are out of the hospital, they're scared."

Staneland has seen signs of survivor guilt when another child dies of the disease, and even post-traumatic stress disorder.

Besides taking care of the patients, she says the clinic is an incredible way to gather and compile anecdotal information, leading to a better understanding of the needs of cancer survivors.

"These kids have been through a lot. Here, we listen to what they have to say. It's very, very important that we listen."

Staneland says most kids visit the clinic once a year, but that depends on the type of cancer and treatment. For example, those surviving brain tumours visit more frequently.

Davis was only 4 years old when he was diagnosed with a cancer in his abdomen. He says it wasn't until he was 12 that he was able to piece the

entire picture together and realize he had endured a distinct experience.

"I don't think too much about it, but I know something happened to me," he says.

"I can remember some things but other things, I can't."

His father, Mortley, says he'll never forget the frustration of travelling from one emergency ward to another without a satisfactory answer to why his child wouldn't stop crying.

It was only SickKids that rose to the challenge. A raft of tests, including blood work, an ultrasound and, finally, a biopsy culminated in the removal of a tumour the size of a baseball.

"My wife and I are just so grateful to this hospital," says Mortley. "Everybody here really stepped up for us."

He says the Survivor Clinic is a reassuring extension of that initial care for his son.

Clinic staff have discovered that chemotherapy damaged the right ventricle of Myles' heart.

For now, his health is unaffected and the condition is being monitored.

Myles is living the life of a happy high school student, a rep baseball player and a lover of many types of music, especially hip hop.

"Things are good now... but I still kneel down and say a prayer every night," he says with a little smile.

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