Who's Who: Dr. Henry Friedman: Cancer Is Curable
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Dr. Henry Friedman, one of the worldÂ's top researchers into brain tumors, scoffs at the idea that cancer isnÂ't curable. And FriedmanÂ's work has been widely acknowledged, including two segments on the CBS program 60 Minutes.

Â"I believe you can be cured,Â" said Friedman, deputy director of the acclaimed Preston Robert Tisch Brain Tumor Center at Duke University. Â"The cancer may be in remission,Â" Friedman acknowledged, Â"but it can be in remission permanently.Â"

FriedmanÂ's positive attitude permeates the Center, where one of the worldÂ's rarest and deadliest forms of cancer is diagnosed and treated with experimental of medicines, such as gene therapy, if a cure seems possible.

Tug McGraw, one of Major League BaseballÂ's most memorable relievers, made the positive, never-say-die slogan, Â"You Gotta Believe!Â" in leading the underdog New York Mets to a World Series title, came to the Duke center for treatment. Unfortunately, he finally succumbed to a brain tumor Â— but not before putting up a valiant fight.

Friedman has a similar belief: Â"We know that a brain tumor is unlike any other disease. We take an aggressive team approach to find answers and provide hope. We play to win. We want survivors.Â"

Friedman knew McGraw well before treating him, having grown up in New York as a Mets fan. Friedman also treated the late Robert Tisch, owner of the NFL New York Giants after whom the Center is named.

Treating patients with novel treatments Â— often available only in clinical trials Â— has made the Tisch Center famous. There have been so many cures that the Center will open a clinic only for survivors next April.

What are the ingredients for success at the Center?

Â"First, we have a program that weds the finest research lab in the world to a seamless translation to the clinical world,Â" Friedman explained. Â"We have clinical trials that rapidly go from the lab into the clinic.

Â"Second, we strongly believe that you have to have the right approach Â— and by that I mean

the philosophy that you are cured until proved un-curable, which is not much different from being innocent until proven guilty.

Â“Too often physicians take the position that a patientÂ’s case is hopeless, and they perpetuate care that is mediocre. They look very smart when the prophecy of doom and gloom comes true.Â”

However, Friedman adds an important caveat. Â“We not only want to win, but we donÂ’t want the win to turn into a Pyrrhic victory. We have a program and research center that also provides quality-of-life research for families and caregivers.Â”

To Friedman, the opening of the survivorsÂ’ center next year is proof that the approach is working. Â“If you have enough long-term survivors that you can create a survivorsÂ’ clinic, you know you are doing the right thing,Â” he said, Â“and thatÂ’s why we are here.Â”

The number of people afflicted with brain tumors is not that large when compared to other tumors and cancers. Tumors strike some 40,000 adults a year, and approximately half are malignant, Friedman noted. Between 2000 and 3000 children a year are struck with tumors. So in numbers, he said, many people consider such tumors as an Â“orphan diseaseÂ” that does not receive the funding or attention given to others. But to Friedman, fighting these tumors is a passion.

He traces his love to be a doctor to a TV show and a book he read as a child. Â“I started watching the Dr. Kildare show when I was 9, and I fell in love with that,Â” Friedman recalled. Â“The first book I remember reading was about microbe hunters written in the 1940s, including the story of Louis Pasteur and others.Â”

His inspiration led him to Syracuse University, where he received his medical degree in 1977. After four years of research, he came to Duke to study neuro-oncology in 1983. He has never left. His love for care actually was triggered in part by lab work when he was in training as a pediatric oncologist. Friedman Â“hatedÂ” red cell research and headed into oncology.

Research runs in the family. His wife, Dr. Joanne Kurtzberg, is chief of pediatrics/blood and marrow transplantation at Duke and is a pioneer in stem cell research.

Friedman and Kurtzberg have two children, Josh, who attends Stanford Law School, and Sarah, a Duke sophomore.