Cancer doesn’t travel well—especially cancer in children,” says Peter Cole, MD, Chief of the Division of Pediatric Hematology/Oncology at Rutgers Cancer Institute, the state’s only National Cancer Institute-Designated Comprehensive Cancer Center. “New Jersey families dealing with a diagnosis as significant as cancer shouldn’t have to leave their neighborhood and support systems to travel to another state for treatment.”

The Pediatric Cancer Center at Rutgers Cancer Institute partners with RWJBarnabas Health (RWJBH) facilities throughout the state to provide the most advanced treatments for children with cancer and blood disorders.

“I tell my friends and family and anyone who asks that whenever you get an unexpected diagnosis, it’s always good to get a second opinion,” Dr. Cole says.
The $10 million in state funding was championed by Grace Eline, a 12-year-old survivor of brain cancer and a childhood cancer awareness advocate, and her mother, Aubrey Eline, in collaboration with the American Childhood Cancer Organization. Grace was treated at Rutgers Cancer Institute and Children’s Hospital of New Jersey at Newark Beth Israel Medical Center.

“...when you have the option to get cutting-edge care close to home, where you have access to your support system, you should do it. At Rutgers Cancer Institute and RWJBarnabas Health, your child will get the highest level of expertise and treatment, right here in New Jersey.”

The pediatric hematology/oncology team takes a multidisciplinary approach to providing the most advanced treatments for pediatric cancer and blood disorders, such as complex surgical techniques, precision medicine, immunotherapy and innovative radiation therapy procedures, including the state’s only hospital-based proton therapy center. In addition, as New Jersey’s only NCI-Designated Comprehensive Cancer Center, Rutgers Cancer Institute offers access to cutting-edge clinical trials and cellular therapies that may not be available at other programs.

A HOLISTIC APPROACH

The specialists at Rutgers Cancer Institute and RWJBH know that, in addition to treating the body, it’s important to pay close attention to the emotional and social challenges of the patient and family. “A diagnosis of cancer turns a family’s life upside down, so we have a robust psychosocial support team to address the needs not just of the patient, but of parents and siblings as well,” says Dr. Cole. That team includes psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, social workers, nutritionists and educators.

“We’re committed to keeping kids on top of their studies,” says Dr. Cole. “At Rutgers Cancer Institute, we have a full-time teacher on staff in the building on school days. I’ll often sit with our patients and do math problems with them, though I suspect I may enjoy that much more than they do,” he says with a laugh.

He recalls a teenage patient who had acute lymphoblastic leukemia, the most common cancer in children but also one of the most curable. “He had to spend the first month of treatment in the hospital, away from his support network of friends and coaches,” says Dr. Cole. “Some of the side effects of his treatment, such as vomiting, were miserable, and he was embarrassed to lose his hair. He was depressed, but he received the support he needed from our psychosocial team.

“I’m happy to report that he’s doing much better now. He’s back in school as he fully reenters his routine, we’ll be there for him.”

AN INFUSION OF FUNDS FOR RESEARCH

Survival rates for children with cancer have improved significantly in the past 50 years, but pediatric cancer remains the leading cause of death from disease among children. It is among the least funded areas of cancer research.

Advocates cheered when a $10 million appropriation to support pediatric cancer research at Rutgers Cancer Institute was included in the New Jersey 2022 state budget.

“The funding allows us to expand our ongoing efforts. One of our areas of focus is research in children that will help reduce acute side effects of treatment and the risk of it resulting in long-term organ damage,” explains Peter Cole, MD, Chief of the Division of Pediatric Hematology/Oncology and Embrace Kids Foundation Endowed Chair at Rutgers Cancer Institute, who is also Director, Pediatric Hematology, Oncology and Cellular Therapies at Bristol-Myers Squibb Children’s Hospital and Professor of Pediatrics at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. Dr. Cole’s laboratory is also supported by the Hugs for Brady Foundation.

“Another area of focus is bringing innovative treatment modalities to children with cancer and blood disorders,” Dr. Cole says, “including cellular therapies like CAR T-cell therapy, blood and marrow transplants and immunotherapies, which use the patient’s own immune cells to fight cancer.”