14 New Trends in Milwaukee Health Care

Local health organizations share some of the most impactful programs and research on the horizon.

BY ERIN TREDER

Each year, MKE area health organizations offer new programs and advancements aimed to address the most pressing health needs in the community. This past year was no different — hundreds of studies, trials, and research contributions currently underway close to home continue to probe conditions and diseases that will affect many of us or a loved one at some point.

We looked for some of the health care trends and innovations in our area, and what health organizations are doing to meet the needs of those seeking care, through new medications, surgeries and research.

1. New Radiation Treatments

Soon some cancer patients won't have to travel far to receive a treatment that makes radiation therapy more effective and easier to tolerate. As of 2025, these patients will be able to receive proton therapy at the Froedtert Clinical Cancer Center. Proton therapy — not currently available in Wisconsin — supports refined dosing strategies for cancer patients to increase effectiveness of radiation treatment and decrease side effects. Construction for the new proton therapy system will begin this year.

2. Prioritizing Dental Health

Dental health is just as important as medical health, but can often be overlooked in underprivileged communities. Local health organizations are expanding services to make sure these needs are met.

In 2022, Ascension Seton Dental Clinic expanded its existing mobile dental program with the addition of mobile dental chairs. The mobile program primarily supports children who have an urgent need, but when school is not in session, it also supports other adults and children in settings including early learning centers and homeless shelters.

ProHealth Medical Group developed another new dental program in partnership with Community Smiles Dental, a community-based clinic for families with limited incomes who are on Medicaid or uninsured. The bi-lingual program is a joint effort to improve dental health of young children, pregnant women, and others in the community. Patients are screened during their well-child and medical visits one day per week.

"Dental health is an important aspect of overall health," says Heather Johnson, director or medical group operations for ProHealth Medical Group. "The screenings help break down barriers for people who haven't known how vital dental care is for well-being, or where to find good care, especially for those who don't speak English as their primary language. The goal is to set people up for success." A total of 167 patients were screened during the first nine months of the program.

3. Development of the Healthcare Workforce

New programs are being established to address the shortages in the healthcare workforce that can affect quality of care. A $12 million Froedtert Memorial Hospital Scholarship was established this year to address the challenge.

In partnership with the UW-Milwaukee and Milwaukee Area Technical College, the 20-year program will fund scholarships to support representation of historically underprivileged racial and ethnic groups. "To continue to provide the highest quality care, we must also support and enhance opportunities for deserving students seeking a career in health sciences," says Cathy Jacobson, president and chief executive officer of Froedtert Health.

4. Continued Digital Innovation

Ease of accessibility is key to successful healthcare — and digital innovations make that possible for local patients. Froedtert & the Medical College of Wisconsin now provide therapies designed to support more than 33,000 patients with a variety of conditions. Digital solutions support mental health care, diabetes, maternity, rehabilitation, patient education and more. Patients and families are able to manage and treat conditions at home, and when they need additional support, clinicians can remotely review the data and provide assistance.

5. More Natural Approaches to Hormonal Health

Women are beginning to seek alternative approaches to hormonal health, shifting away from taking birth control as the solution for hormonal issues they face, says Lindsay Moreau, N.D., at Ideal Human in Sussex. She says her patients have good success using nutrients, diet, and herbs instead of medications.

"Women are coming to Ideal Human looking for natural ways to balance their hormones, get rid of PMS and prepare for pregnancy," says Dr. Moreau. "It's so empowering to teach women about their hormones and the signs that their body is giving them, and how our hormones impact everything from energy to sleep and mood."

6. Waterbirth in Hospitals

Currently, there are no hospitals in southeastern Wisconsin that offer waterbirth as an option to expectant mothers, but a study underway at Aurora Sinai Medical Center may change that. A team is exploring waterbirth as a way to control pain and improve birth outcomes for mother and baby.

"Waterbirth is a patient-centered method of pain relief associated with high maternal satisfaction," says certified nurse midwife Emily Malloy, CNM. "By participating in this clinical trial, we're able to bring the option to our patients while evaluating its safety and effectiveness in a hospital setting." As of November 2022, the program has enrolled 94 participants and completed 18 waterbirths.

7. Medically Supervised Weight-Loss Programs

Bariatric surgery isn't the only option for weight loss: Medically supervised weight loss programs are growing rapidly, according to Ascension Wisconsin. Its bariatric care teams offer consultations with doctors who specialize in non-surgical weight management for both adults and children. The team, which includes a dietician, exercise physiologist, and behavioral health support, partners with patients to assess their current lifestyle and creates a personalized plan to address their needs and meet their weight loss goals.

8. Remote Heart Monitoring

Remote access is a boon for monitoring health. More than 100 participants (many through Aurora St. Luke's Medical Center) enrolled in a clinical trial that led to the FDA approval of a device that remotely monitors a patient's heart for signs of heart failure. Once implanted, the device automatically alerts physicians if there's a concern.

"Using a heart failure remote monitoring program, our team can now monitor and provide personalized care to patients from the comfort of their homes or while they travel around the world," says Nasir Sulemanjee, M.D. who was the study's principal investigator at Aurora St. Luke's. "We've seen a greater than 50 percent reduction in hospitalizations for our patients with heart failure who are enrolled in this program." As of September 2022, Aurora St. Luke's has implanted 350 of the devices.

9. The Outdoors As Medicine

We all know that spending time outdoors has many health benefits, but a recently published study by Richard Rovin, M.D., a neurosurgeon at Aurora St. Luke's, found that greenspace goes beyond improving your mood — it can potentially prevent stroke. In the report, Dr. Rovin compared the home addresses of Milwaukee County residents with and without a history of stroke, and concluded that the neighborhoods with less greenspace were actually linked to greater incidence of stroke. "It's important from a public health perspective, as urban greenspace should be protected and expanded," says Dr. Rovin.

10. Analyzing DNA for Cancer Treatment

Imagine taking a medication that's tailored specifically for your DNA. A new medicine clinical trial will aim to provide cancer patients with access to targeted study drugs matched to the genomic profiles of their cancers. "Some patients with late-stage cancer eventually stop responding to conventional treatment options," says Antony Ruggeri, M.D., a hematologist and oncologist at Advocate Aurora Research Institute. "By analyzing an individual patient's DNA, researchers and doctors may be able to pinpoint existing anticancer drugs that target the unique genetic fingerprint of that patient's cancer." The study is currently enrolling patients.

11. Technology to Treat Liver Cancer

An innovative alternative for treating primary and metastatic liver tumors is currently being performed as part of a groundbreaking study at Froedtert & MCW Cancer Network. Called histotripsy, the procedure uses sound pulses to generate small "bubble clouds" of gasses that form and collapse in microseconds. This creates a cavitation effect that can break down tumor tissue at the cellular level.

"It's non-invasive and doesn't use heat the way other ablation therapies do," says Amanda Smolock, M.D., a vascular and interventional radiologist and MCW faculty member involved with the clinical trial.

12. Minimally Invasive Brain Surgery

Later Interstitial Thermal Therapy (LITT) is a new minimally invasive option being offered for brain tumor surgery. A laser probe is used through a tiny incision to kill tumor tissue. "This procedure uses a much smaller incision and may decrease length of stay in the hospital compared to a traditional craniotomy surgery," says Dr. Max Krucoff, M.D., neurosurgeon at Froedtert & MCW. "Depending on the type and location of the tumor treated, patients can often go home one or two days after the procedure."

13. Advances in Breast Cancer Surgery

New approaches are simplifying breast cancer removal surgery. Aurora St. Luke's Medical Center is the third site in the country to join a trial to help better guide surgeons while removing tumors. Instead of relying on radiology images that are taken before and after surgery, surgeons are using an investigational drug and image device to illuminate tissue in real time.

"By providing surgeons with a way to view malignant cells in real time during surgery, the investigational imaging method has the potential to reduce the likelihood that additional surgeries are needed to remove any missed cancer, and possibly reduce health care costs and improve cosmetic outcomes at the same time," says Nicole Zaremba, M.D., Advocate Aurora Research Institute principal investigator for the study.

14. A Better CT Scanner

GE Healthcare recently announced the University of Wisconsin-Madison as the first U.S. clinical evaluation site for the company's industry-first silicon based photon counting CT (PCCT) system. Researchers at UW-Madison kicked off research scanning human subjects with GE Healthcare's latest generation PCCT prototype, developed by GE lead engineering program manager Mark Frontera of Waukesha, in December.

PCCT is engineered with Deep Silicon detectors with the goal of greatly enhancing imaging capabilities — including quicker scan times and expanded coverage — to help clinicians improve patient outcomes across oncology, cardiology, neurology and clinical CT applications.

"Photon counting detectors push CT technology forward in two major ways: better spatial resolution and better contrast resolution," says Tim Szczykutowicz, Ph.D., associate professor radiology at UW-Madison. "For CT, photon counting is undoubtedly the next big thing." MKE