Division-Wide COVID-19 Response

More than six months into the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Division of Nephrology continues to respond in innovative and flexible ways to offer premier patient care, safe work environments, and critical fellowship training.

Early in 2020, hospitals across the country recognized that patients with end-stage kidney disease were at higher risk for developing more serious complications from COVID-19. To minimize risk of exposure to attending physicians and staff, the Division established an attendings-only voluntary COVID-19 nephrology response team, which went into effect on March 20th when the first COVID-19 patient was hospitalized and had to be treated for renal complications. ‘We had four teams of two attendings each covering any renal issues related to COVID-19 patients,’ says Division Chief Benjamin Humphreys, MD, PhD. ‘At times throughout the spring and summer months, the number of patients we saw in the ICUs climbed significantly, but we had protocols in place to handle the load and dedicated faculty who stepped up to the challenge.’

Anitha Vijayan, MD, medical director for Acute Dialysis Services at Barnes-Jewish Hospital, was part of a team of physicians and administrators within the medical center identifying and implementing guidelines for the management of COVID-19 patients. Working with the hospital’s dialysis nurse manager, Vijayan created a rapid response protocol for renal consults, COVID ICU rounds, AKI management, renal replacement therapy, daily rounds, and management of end-stage renal disease patients.

In the outpatient dialysis centers, there was an immediate need to screen patients for COVID-19 exposure. As patients came multiple times a week, the division was part of a herculean effort to use the medical center’s electronic medical records system, EPIC, to rapidly and easily share testing information among physician offices and outpatient sites.

“We had a unified goal in all of our efforts,” says Jodean Baldauf, nephrology’s senior director of business operations & business development. “We wanted to continue to deliver superb clinical care while taking all available and reasonable measures to protect the patients and staff from COVID-19.”

When identified, symptomatic patients were isolated from other patients, and if a center had more than one COVID-19 positive patient, those patients were grouped on the same shift for dialysis. Baldauf also initiated a weekly call with representatives from local St. Louis DaVita and Fresenius offices as well as transportation companies to keep communication channels open about COVID-19 precautions in effect for dialysis patients.

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“‘In the beginning, patients were a little frightened,’ admits Teresa Tamburello, RN, nurse administrator at Chromalloy Dialysis Center. ‘But spirits are a better now and we have a set routine, which makes everyone more comfortable.’

She adds, “I can’t commend our staff enough. We don’t stand out like the more high-profile front-liners like the EMTs, ICU and ER personnel, but we are here on the front line, too, working very long hours, doing our jobs and doing them well!”

Staff also worked long hours from home, handling everything from administrative duties to setting up a new nephrology telehealth service. In addition, the majority of academic and staff meetings were pushed to virtual platforms. Researchers in the division also held team Zoom calls. “It’s a way for all of us to remain engaged, stay sharp and keep somewhat sane during this pandemic lockdown,” explains Jeffrey Miner, PhD, director of basic research in the division.

Fellowship program leadership also increased communications to engage trainees while maintaining training opportunities. “We receive text messages, emails, lunch, PPEs and most of all, our education has not been compromised in any way,” says fellow Blessing Osondu, MD.

Adds Dr. Vijayan, “It is a privilege to work with such generous and brave colleagues and staff. We come to work every day with the attitude that we are all in this together.”
Message from the Chief

As we went to press in the COVID-19 pandemic, unaware of what lay ahead. Since then I have been so proud of how our faculty, fellows and staff have come together to carry out our core missions of patient care, education and research under drastically different circumstances than normal. Our basic science team manufactured hand sanitizer (“Wash You”) and distributed it throughout the medical campus at a time when supplies were short. Our clinical attending selflessly volunteered for the COVID-19 inpatient service as well as to cover general medicine. Our fellows got through the early scare and have adapted to the new reality with grace.

More recently we have had division-wide dialogues concerning the Black Lives Matter movement and how we as a division can adopt anti-racist practices. We have all grown accustomed to telehealth visits (and the attendant Zoom fatigue) and our fellowship leadership team has done a magnificent job designing an engaging virtual fellowship recruitment season. Despite the challenges that remain, including our concerns about the coming flu season and the possibility of a third wave, I am incredibly heartened by the resilience, creativity and commitment shown by the entire division. I have every confidence that we will all continue to rise to the challenge and emerge from this pandemic as a stronger community.

Benjamin D. Humphreys, MD, PhD
Joseph F. Friedman Professor and Chief Division of Nephrology
Washington University School of Medicine

Virtual Recruitment Expands Number of Applicants

With COVID-19 forcing medical schools across the country to move to virtual recruitment for residencies and fellowships, the Division of Nephrology went full steam ahead with innovative ways to connect with applicants to its nationally recognized Nephrology Fellowship Training Program.

The unusual benefit of the pandemic was that applicants no longer had to weigh the economic costs of traveling across the country to move to virtual visits (and the attendant Zoom fatigue) and the carefully curated experience during their interview date provided an incredibly rich experience.

“Socks, T-shirts, pins. It was all a package,” says Seth Goldberg, MD, “and the carefully curated experience during their interview date provided an incredibly rich experience. They also received information about the fellowship program, including this division’s unique strengths and current fellows. “We went the extra mile in setting ourselves apart from other programs,” says Cheng. “The care package and the carefully curated experience during their interview date provided an incredibly strong picture of our division’s strengths. We think it’s gone extraordinarily well despite not having in-person interviews.”

Thank You!
The Division of Nephrology thanks the following individuals who have generously donated to our division from February 2020 through September 23, 2020:

- Mr. and Mrs. Albert J. and Patricia A. Anderson
- Dr. John E. Buerkert
- Dr. Feng Chen
- Dr. and Ms. Arvind and Dipika Garg
- Dr. Seth Goldberg
- Dr. Sanjay Jain
- Dr. Anuja Java
- Dr. Charbel Khoury
- Dr. Mei-Hua Lin
- Ms. Patricia M. McKevitt
- Mr. Vicha Menon
- Dr. Anubha Mehtneja
- Ms. Christina Sakho
- Dr. Sadaf Sheikh
- LaNese Vahdat
- Dr. Anitha Vijayan

Fellowship Notes
It takes a collaborative team approach to educate and train fellows in our Nephrology Fellowship program. Earlier this year, I joined Program Director Steven Cheng, MD, and Associate Program Directors Seth Goldberg, MD, and Tingting Li, MD, MSC, on an expanded leadership team in order to enhance all aspects of the program and ensure that we continuously evolve education, research and clinical care opportunities for all fellows.

In my role overseeing curriculum development, my primary focus is to enable fellows to obtain a broad and thorough education. Since joining the Division of Nephrology in 2017, I have had a specific interest in enhancing educational opportunities and have created specific curricula for some of the core competencies of our Nephrology Training Program. These changes ensure that our fellows will continue to leave our program as among the best trained in the country. For example, our home modalities program is the largest in the country. To take advantage of this, we created a specific program that emphasizes the interdisciplinary nature of dialysis, harnessing the expertise of our nurses, dietitians and social workers. By the time fellows leave our program, not only will they be experienced with multidisciplinary collaborative care approaches, they also will be experts in the fields of peritoneal dialysis and home hemodialysis. Because of this, they are well positioned to serve in leadership roles in a wide variety of dialysis settings as they move forward in their career paths.

By Frank O’Brien, MD
Associate Program Director, Curriculum Development

Washington University in St. Louis
School of Medicine
Division of Nephrology Alumni Newsletter
Alumni Connections

Aubrey Morrison, MBBS, MACP, FASN
Professor Emeritus, Washington University School of Medicine
Nephrology Clinical Research Fellow, 1973-1975
Research Fellow in Pharmacology, 1976-1978

Ask Aubrey Morrison, MBBS, to characterize his 45-year career at Washington University School of Medicine, and he puncts to a draft of his memoirs that he’s working on titled, “Reflections of a Naïve Trainee.” Morrison, who retired from the Division of Nephrology in early October 2020, flew to St. Louis in 1970 after graduating from the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin, Ireland. “A professor of medicine in Dublin was a nephrologist and he took a special interest in me as a student, which kindled my interest in nephrology,” says Morrison. “One of my classmates, who had a father on the faculty at Johns Hopkins, said that his father suggested I apply to the rotating internship program at Barnes Hospital. The program was in its last year before being phased out and I knew nothing about St. Louis, Barnes Hospital, or Washington University but I decided to fly across the ocean to take the position. If one thinks this naivete was bordering on stupidity, I would understand.”

But he jumped into the role. As he did, he couldn’t help noticing that all of the physicians around him were white. “All the attendings, residents, and my peer interns were white. I stood out as the only black person,” he says. He recalls, vividly, how some physicians mistook him as a transport porter, requesting stretchers and other equipment before realizing he was a physician himself. “Frankly, my presence as a black intern in the surgical suites was a significant departure from the norm, and that forced a rethinking of attitudes at a time when St. Louis had a colorful segregational history.”

Complicating his career path was the fact that only three prior rotating interns were accepted as residents in medicine. After an unexpected office conversation with then-chair of the Department of Medicine, Carl Moore, MD, Morrison applied for and was later accepted as an internal medicine resident. Again, he noted, all the attending physicians and the majority of house staff were white and he was the only black resident.

What is indelibly marked in memory is the time in 1972 when a white patient refused to be examined by Morrison, who by then was senior assistant resident. The attending physician learned about the refusal and told the patient that if she refused to be examined by Dr. Morrison, she needed to find another doctor. “At that moment,” Morrison says, “I was very reassured that the program was committed to supporting house staff and confronting acts of racism on the service.”

As he moved on through a clinical research fellowship in nephrology and a postdoctoral research fellow in pharmacology, however, overt and subtle forms of racism occurred. At every level, Morrison rose to the occasion. He noted, all the attending physicians and the majority of house staff were white and he was the only black resident.

Investigation in 1982. When he was promoted to Professor of Medicine in 1987, he was the first black at the School of Medicine to achieve a full professorship. “The door opened a crack and I went through, which has allowed others to follow,” he notes. What to do in retirement? Morrison says he’ll travel and keep his ties to the Division of Nephrology and the Department of Internal Medicine for as long as he can. And he’ll remember the remarkable patients and advocates he met while forging an amazing career path at Washington University School of Medicine.

Program Spotlight

Nephrology Telehealth Services

“The benefit of launching a nephrology telehealth program became visibly apparent during this year’s COVID-19 pandemic.”

“Patients were anxious about coming on campus and doing in-person clinic visits, especially as the number of COVID cases were increasing,” says Jodean Baldauf, senior director of business operations and business development for the division. “Telehealth allowed them to get questions answered and the care they needed from the comfort of their homes.”

With a tight turnaround time for implementation to ensure patient care continued, the division launched audio and video telehealth services in mid-March for evaluation and disease management services, education services and home dialysis visits. Technology challenges quickly became apparent.

“Some patients didn’t have computers or weren’t tech-savvy, so video visits were not really an option for them and we used phones instead,” explains Baldauf. “We also had to react and adapt to federal regulations related to telehealth as well as address medical licensure issues when handling calls from our providers and out-of-state patients.”

In addition, the staff had to quickly learn new technology while teaching it to their patients. “Our team worked very hard and they quickly developed a new workflow to implement telehealth,” says Barbara Schmaltz, BSIN, RN, renal outpatient nurse manager. “There was a lot of collaboration between our team and the providers to get all of the needs of our patients met. We also did this while many of us were working remotely.”

The School of Medicine and Barnes-Jewish Hospital also coordinated efforts to enhance telehealth services and support providers who needed secure access to medical charts. Physicians extended hours to accommodate both in-person clinic visits and telehealth visits.

Over the past several months, hundreds of patients have accessed nephrology telehealth services. Says Baldauf, “The end result was that patients really seemed to like having the telehealth option to maintain their health so we are planning to keep it up and running going forward.”

New Nephrology Telehealth Fellows

The division welcomes two new transplant fellows to its training program.

Wut Yi Hanbin, MBBS, comes to the Division after completing a fellowship in nephrology at the University of Texas Health Science Center in Houston. She earned her medical degree from the Institute of Medicine in 1 Myanmar.

Munis Mattu, MD, earned his medical degree from Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College in India and completed a fellowship in nephrology at the University of Kansas School of Medicine.

The Division accepts two nephrology transplant fellows annually and, at times, a transplant research fellow. Washington University School of Medicine’s kidney transplant program at Barnes-Jewish Hospital is one of the largest transplant centers in the country, averaging more than 325 kidney transplants annually. That represents more than half of all kidney transplants in the state of Missouri. In 2019, the hospital celebrated its 10,000th transplant!

The program also has excellent outcomes, with short- and long-term organ rejection rates following transplant consistently below national averages. In addition to cadaver kidney donations, the center offers living kidney donor matching and transplant.
Chang-Panesso’s research mentor.

Division chief

New Faculty

Faculty News and Awards

Morrison Receives Nathan Hellman Memorial Teaching Award

Andrew Malone, MB, BCH, is first author of a research study published in the September 2020 issue of JASN, titled, "Harnessing Expressed Single Nucleotide Variation and Single Cell RNA Sequencing To Define Immune Cell Chimerism in the Rejecting Kidney Transplant.” A cellular image from the study appears on the cover. He and co-first author Haojia Wu, PhD, also had another cover illustration in the August 2018 edition of JASN. Malone currently serves as a senior investigator in the research lab of Jeffrey Miner, PhD, at Washington University School of Medicine. He earned his medical degree from the University of Arizona College of Medicine. A fellow in our program from 2018 to 2020, Malone’s interests include the study of cardiovascular complications in chronic kidney disease and end-stage renal disease.

Meei-Hua Lin, PhD, a senior scientist in the research lab of Jeffrey Miner, PhD, is first author of a research study published in the June 2020 issue of Developmental Dynamics titled, “Mammalian hemiscenitin 1 is assembled into tracks in the extracellular matrix of multiple tissues.” Her research also was on the cover of JASN in 2018 highlighting another published research effort titled, "Laminin-521 Protein Therapy for Glomerular Basement Membrane and Podocyte Abnormalities in a Model of Pierson Syndrome.”

Research Publication Covers — 2 in 2 x 2!

Congratulations to two faculty who scored repeats for having research highlighted on the covers of two peer-reviewed publications within the past two years.

Moe Mahjoub, PhD, along with Wu collaborators Susan Dutcher, PhD, professor of genetics, cell biology & physiology, and Steven Brody, MD, the Dorothy R. and Steven Brody, MD, Retirement Professor of Pulmonary Medicine, received the 2020 Nathan Hellman, MD, PhD, Memorial Teaching Award. The award is given annually by nephrology fellows to a member of the faculty to recognize excellence in education. Over his more than 40 years as a faculty member at Washington University, Morrison has mentored a long list of fellows and research scientists. He is a former fellow in our program (1975) and is a recognized pioneer in the study of inflammatory processes in the body and how cytokine proteins and prostaglandins interact to control the body’s response to inflammation, injury, or illness, particularly in chronic kidney disease.

Two new faculty: Andy Chuu, MD, joins the division as assistant professor of medicine for WashU Nephrology and the Veterans Affairs (VA) St. Louis Health Care System. He earned his medical degree from the University of Arizona College of Medicine. A fellow in our program from 2018 to 2020, Chuu’s interests include the study of cardiovascular complications in chronic kidney disease and end-stage renal disease.

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#nephSTRONG!

Let’s stay strong during this COVID-19 pandemic! That’s the message from WashU Nephrology, which distributed #nephSTRONG t-shirts to 180 faculty, staff, and trainees earlier this year.

The design was created by two children of faculty: Maya Menon, daughter of Anitha Vijayan, MD, and Nate Li, son of Tingting Li, MD. Their design shows two kidneys placed in the shape of a heart. Banners also were printed for distribution to dialysis units and office locations.

Do you want a T-shirt with the #nephStrong logo, too? Make a donation to our WashU Nephrology Dialysis Patient Assistance Fund of $15 or more and you can receive one as a thank you gift!

Visit nephrology.wustl.edu and click on Giving at the bottom of the home page.

#nephSTRONG —
WashU Division of Nephrology —
better together