



Navigating a pandemic to provide lifesaving holistic care

By Amber Hollingsworth

Back in May when many patients were receiving care virtually, couple James Searles and Meaghan Gilhooly, D.V.M., asked Family Medicine for an in-person visit. James had developed back pain that was getting progressively worse and wasn't responding to medical management.

"I'm a small animal veterinarian, my dad is a neonatologist at Doernbecher (Dr. Joseph Gilhooly), and my mom is a pediatric RN (Jennifer Gilhooly)," Meaghan explains. "So when James had lymph node enlargement and experienced significant weight loss, I got nervous."

It was a Monday evening when James met Mustafa Mahmood, M.D., a fourth-year resident at Family Medicine's South Waterfront clinic. Anthony Cheng, M.D., – Meaghan's primary care physician – was the attending, and the two of them took the case together.

"Dr. Mahmood was very aggressive. By Wednesday we had a biopsy, and by Friday the diagnosis. This process typically takes quite a bit longer, but Dr. Mahmood and Dr. Cheng pushed hard on pathology so that we were able to get the diagnosis quickly."

James had choriocarcinoma, a very rare form of testicular cancer.

"Most people would miss this type of cancer, because it's so rare," Meaghan says. "The fact that Dr. Mahmood went back through James's medical record and pushed for diagnosis and treatment... a lot of people don't push for the treatment piece, and this is one where you have to treat it fast."

"I so appreciate him advocating for us when I couldn't."

Because of visitation restrictions around COVID-19, Meaghan was unable to join James in the ICU when they decided to admit him for treatment that evening. "Dr. Mahmood came in. He was not on call, but he came in and stayed with James until he was admitted. Leaving your husband at the doors of the

Emergency Room is really daunting. And knowing that someone was there... you know, I don't know Dr. Mahmood well, but I knew I could trust him.”

That next day after his shift, Dr. Mahmood joined James in the ICU and FaceTimed Meaghan along with Ran Ran, M.D., in Emergency Medicine to discuss treatment options. They assessed the risks, made decisions as a team, and the elective intubation went smoothly.

“Dr. Mahmood checked on me every day while James was in the ICU,” Meaghan says. “When he would visit James, he would FaceTime with me so I could see that James was OK. It's really above and beyond, the empathy and the care. It is so, so appreciated when you're navigating something so scary.”

Meaghan also praised Dr. Mahmood for being a critical clinician. “Really believing your patients is so important. And the holistic approach he took — you can tell he was putting himself in my shoes. He has kids as well, so he also sent me resources to help my children process this, which really helped.”

“I think Family Medicine often gets overlooked, but they do such a good job of taking that holistic approach. I'm a generalist — that's what I do for a living — so I appreciate a generalist that is astute and knows their lane, but also knows how to advocate for their patient.”

James is now recovering at home with Meaghan by his side. “We’ve been together for 19 years. He’s my person. My rock. My lobster,” Meaghan says. “And he’s here today thanks to Dr. Mahmood.”



Meaghan and James at home with their children.



Mustafa Mahmood, M.D.

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