

Northwestern Medicine multiple sclerosis program earns national designation

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Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is an unpredictable, often debilitating autoimmune disease of the central nervous system that affects more than 400,000 Americans. Patients with MS require specialized care that addresses the many physical and psychological impacts of their condition. Northwestern Medicine's MS program was recently recognized for providing exemplary care and is the first in the Midwest region to be designated as a National Multiple Sclerosis Society (NMSS) Affiliated Center for Comprehensive Care.

A collaboration between Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, the program was founded in 1986 by its co-directors Bruce Cohen, MD, neurologist at Northwestern Memorial, and James Sliwa, DO, rehabilitation medicine specialist at Northwestern Memorial and the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago. The program currently serves patients from across the Midwest by providing diagnostic and treatment services, as well as access to clinical research studies on manifestations and treatments of MS.

"MS is a disease that affects all aspects of the body influenced by the [central nervous system](#)," explained Cohen, who is also a professor of neurology at the Feinberg School. "The disease impacts human function in many ways; it's crucial to address all aspects of it to optimize therapy and quality of life for the individual. This designation recognizes our program's ability to comprehensively treat the disease and help our patients optimize their quality of life."

Northwestern's program was one of the first to provide a multidisciplinary approach to the treatment of the MS by combining medical, physical and rehabilitative strategies. Specialists in neuro-ophthalmology, neuropsychology, neuro-urology, neuro-otology, neuroradiology and psychiatry collaborate in the care of individual patients to address the symptoms of the disease. The program also has two full-time, dedicated nurses who are certified by the International Organization of MS Nursing (IOMSN). The affiliated MS clinic at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago provides disease-focused physical, occupational and speech therapy, orthotic assessment and implementation, and therapeutic programs to optimize function and quality of life for the MS patient.

"By combining the expertise and resources of multiple disciplines, we are able to offer a well-linked program that provides the best care to our patients," said Sliwa, who is also a professor in the department of physical medicine and rehabilitation at the Feinberg School. "Patients receive active coordination between different aspects of care that addresses the whole person, not just the disease process. In recent years, medical centers are increasingly evolving to this integrated model of care for treating MS."

In order to be named a Comprehensive Care Center by the NMSS, programs must demonstrate MS expertise and experience, professional focus on MS including involvement in research and NMSS activities, and the ability to address all of the complex needs of someone with the disease. The three year designation requires a rigorous application process and site visit; Northwestern's program was designated on its first attempt.

Since meeting as residents, Cohen and Sliwa have seen firsthand tremendous advancements in the treatment of MS. "We began treating patients 25 years ago with only steroids, but treatment has really

advanced since then with new pharmaceutical options that favorably alter the course of the disease, suppress acute symptoms and treat persistent symptoms," said Cohen. "Today, funding exists for research programs that are contributing to even better options for these patients. MS is on the verge of tremendous developments in rehabilitation therapies and new drugs to treat symptoms."

While MS is not yet a curable disease, research continues to provide significant advancements in its treatment and management. At Northwestern, investigators are currently engaged in trials for new therapeutic approaches, studies of cognitive function in early MS patients, and studies of changes in brain and retinal nerve fiber density as markers of disease activity.

As the physicians remain optimistic about the future of MS treatment, today they focus on providing a high quality of life for their patients. "Even without a cure for MS, it doesn't mean that we can't treat the patient and address all aspects of how their disease affects them," said Sliwa. "We strive to give our patients a full and active life, allowing them to maintain a full spectrum of normal activity."

Provided by Northwestern Memorial Hospital

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