



# *A Team Approach That Led to a* BLESSED EVENT

By Michelle F. Solomon    Photography by Michael Murphy



Elba Silva and her  
baby boy Caua

When you're diagnosed with cancer at the Comprehensive Cancer Center at North Broward Medical Center, you don't go it alone. Phrases such as a "coordination by a multidisciplinary team," "combination of therapies" and "conquering cancer together" become the order of the day. This team approach saved the life of a young woman—and that of her baby.

A few years ago, 30-year-old Elba Silva was diagnosed with two types of cancer simultaneously: cancer of the brain, specifically a medullblastoma brain tumor, and also a form of thyroid cancer. "Other centers could have said, 'This is too much for us to handle,' or 'We don't have the time necessary to care for someone whose care

is so complex,'" says David S. Lessen, M.D., medical oncologist at North Broward's Comprehensive Cancer Center. According to Dr. Lessen, Elba had an unusual tumor type and required highly specialized cancer care.

Two years after her surgery and after a rigorous regimen of chemotherapy, Elba was at a follow-up appointment when she told oncology social worker Linda Watson that she believed she was pregnant, which created an entire other level of care. "When we found out she was pregnant, we worked as a team. Because of her chemotherapy, she was considered a high-risk pregnancy. Different doctors in our hospital system were able to monitor her pregnancy to help make it a successful outcome," says Watson.

## AN INTEGRATED ARRAY OF RESOURCES

Dr. Lessen believes that the resources available to the specialists at the Cancer Center are what make the difference in giving patients high-caliber treatment. "In this environment, we have the availability of everything we need. We have surgical specialists who can participate in the patient's cancer care, we have the radiation department just five steps outside of my door. I can walk upstairs and view a patient's biopsy with a pathologist, plus we have the resources of Moffitt," points out Dr. Lessen. The hospital's affiliation with H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center and Research Institute in Tampa allows doctors and specialists to collaborate with doctors at Moffitt, as well as access the latest research, drug protocols, advanced technology and clinical trials. Moffitt is ranked among the Top 10 cancer centers in the country. "We reached out to Moffitt, and they were very happy to help us with Elba's case. When we wanted a second opinion, she was seen by a neuro-oncologist who was there for us throughout her treatment if we had a question. It just all worked. When I see her with her baby, I can't help but reflect on how very remarkable the whole story is," says Dr. Lessen.

## HIGH-TECH TOOLS AND TREATMENTS

Elba's first symptoms were pounding, almost unbearable headaches. A friend convinced her to seek medical help. A family physician told her she was suffering from depression. "He asks me, 'Are you unhappy?' And I said, 'I love this country; I love my job. How could I have depression?'" He prescribed her an antidepressant. When the headaches intensified, Elba went to North Broward Medical Center's emergency room. "The sophistication and the degree of her treatments required a very precise kind of treatment. We have everything at our disposal," explains Dr. Lessen. "The drugs that we used in her care and the radiation treatments that were administered to her are not used every day. It really required a level of expertise that I believe we have here." And the level of technological sophistication is expanding. This year, the center will add the CyberKnife Robotic Radiosurgery System, the only one of its kind in Broward County. The CyberKnife provides real-time image guidance and highly specialized treatment for cranial tumors. It also allows for precision delivery of radiation.

## THE MIRACLE BABY

Elba's baby, Caua, is a healthy two-month old boy. On a recent sunny day, Elba walked through the Cancer Center with Caua in her arms. As she sat in one of the offices, a parade of radiation technicians, nurses and others staffers from the Cancer Center came in to visit Elba's "Miracle Baby." She said she feels strong now, but she still worries about her baby after all she underwent just prior to her pregnancy. "When the baby was born, his father, Marcello, said to me as soon as he saw him, 'Oh, Elba, he is so healthy. He is the perfect baby boy.'"

The Comprehensive Cancer Center has the resources and with its affiliations is on par with some of the best cancer treatment centers in the United States. But what's most important is the compassionate, healing care that cancer patients and their families receive from the staff. Tears fill Elba Silva's eyes when talking about it. "I love this hospital; I love the people here. They are my family."



# SPIN DOCTORS

## *Defeating Dizziness and Balance Problems*

*By Jennifer Nelson*

Dizziness and imbalance are one of the most frequent reasons people visit their primary care physician, and it's key for patients to have a team in place to help them get to the root of the problem and solve it.



Feeling dizzy or having balance problems are reported in about 9 percent of the population who are 65 years of age or older. What's more, fall-related injuries such as fracturing a hip are a leading cause of death and disability in older individuals. Many of these hip breaks are related to balance disorders.

To get at what causes dizziness and balance problems, it's best to start with the brain, which constantly receives nerve messages from various parts of the body to tell your brain where you are and what position you're in. The three main sources of these nerve messages are:

- Your eyes, since what you look at visually helps your brain tell what position you're in physically.
- Sensation from your skin, muscles and joints, which help your brain know what position your limbs and other parts of the body are in.
- Your inner ears, which include a system of narrow, fluid-filled channels that help control balance and posture.

## DEFINING DIZZINESS

The most important part of any evaluation for dizziness and imbalance is a person's description of the symptoms. It's crucial that people describe the details of what they are experiencing to help in the diagnosis, says Jonathan Oren Harris, M.D., medical director of the stroke program at North Broward Medical Center and a neurologist who was instrumental in developing the hospital's Dizziness and Balance Center. Here's a look at the main types of symptoms that dizzy patients experience and what they can mean from a medical standpoint.

**Lightheadedness.** This kind of dizziness is usually due to a problem with blood pressure dropping when you stand up. You stand up quickly; you get lightheaded and feel like you might pass out. Frequently, it's because you're taking blood pressure medicine and the dosage may be too high. You should also evaluate any other medication(s) you're on for dizziness side effects.

**Vertigo.** This is the sensation where you feel that you are moving or the world around you is moving. This can have several potential causes, says Dr. Harris. The most common is from the inner ear or the nerve going from the inner ear to the brain. Vertigo can be due to an infection or inflammation in the inner ear, such as after a cold or flu. More commonly, it's due to calcium crystals that are normal in one part of the inner ear but break off and float to another part of the inner ear due to aging or head trauma. This causes a characteristic kind of dizziness which occurs when you move your head. Normally, fluid within the inner ear moves to tell your brain that your head is moving. But when you have calcium crystals in that fluid, the crystals shift and send a false signal to your brain that your head is moving when it isn't, which give you a feeling of vertigo.

**Imbalance.** This is the sensation that you are going to fall. "Imbalance is a little harder to figure out, but the number one cause is a peripheral neuropathy where the nerves in your feet aren't working right so that you don't have a good sense of where your feet are," says Dr. Harris. Your feet may feel painful, numb or tingly. Frequently, elderly people who have imbalance are afraid of falling and stop walking, which weakens legs, complicating the problem.

## CHASING DOWN THE CAUSE

The road to diagnosis includes a complete physical examination, checking the blood pressure lying down, sitting up and after standing. A neurological exam checks for each type of dizziness and may require some diagnostic tests such as an MRI to scan the brain for strokes or growths on the nerve that goes from the ear to brain, or an ENG, a standard test to determine if the inner ear is the culprit.

## STOPPING THE SPINNING WITH THERAPY

Once diagnosed, patients who are sent to the Dizziness and Balance Center are evaluated further using a number of diagnostic criteria, including the Smart Balance Master, a piece of equipment likened to a moving platform that tests how the body responds to various motion and movements. It rates a patient's balance with a stability score.

Evidence shows that specialized physical therapy intervention called vestibular therapy can help with dizziness and balance disorders. Vestibular therapy helps the brain compensate for lost balance and dizziness issues. A trained physical therapist at the center will devise an individualized program for each patient after their evaluation and stability score. One common exercise, called the Epley maneuver, repositions the head in specific ways as to bring the calcium crystals back into the part of the ear they belong, alleviating vertigo. "About 80 percent of patients have relief and are done in one treatment," says Luz Wiedecke, a physical therapist who has been at the center for 12 years.

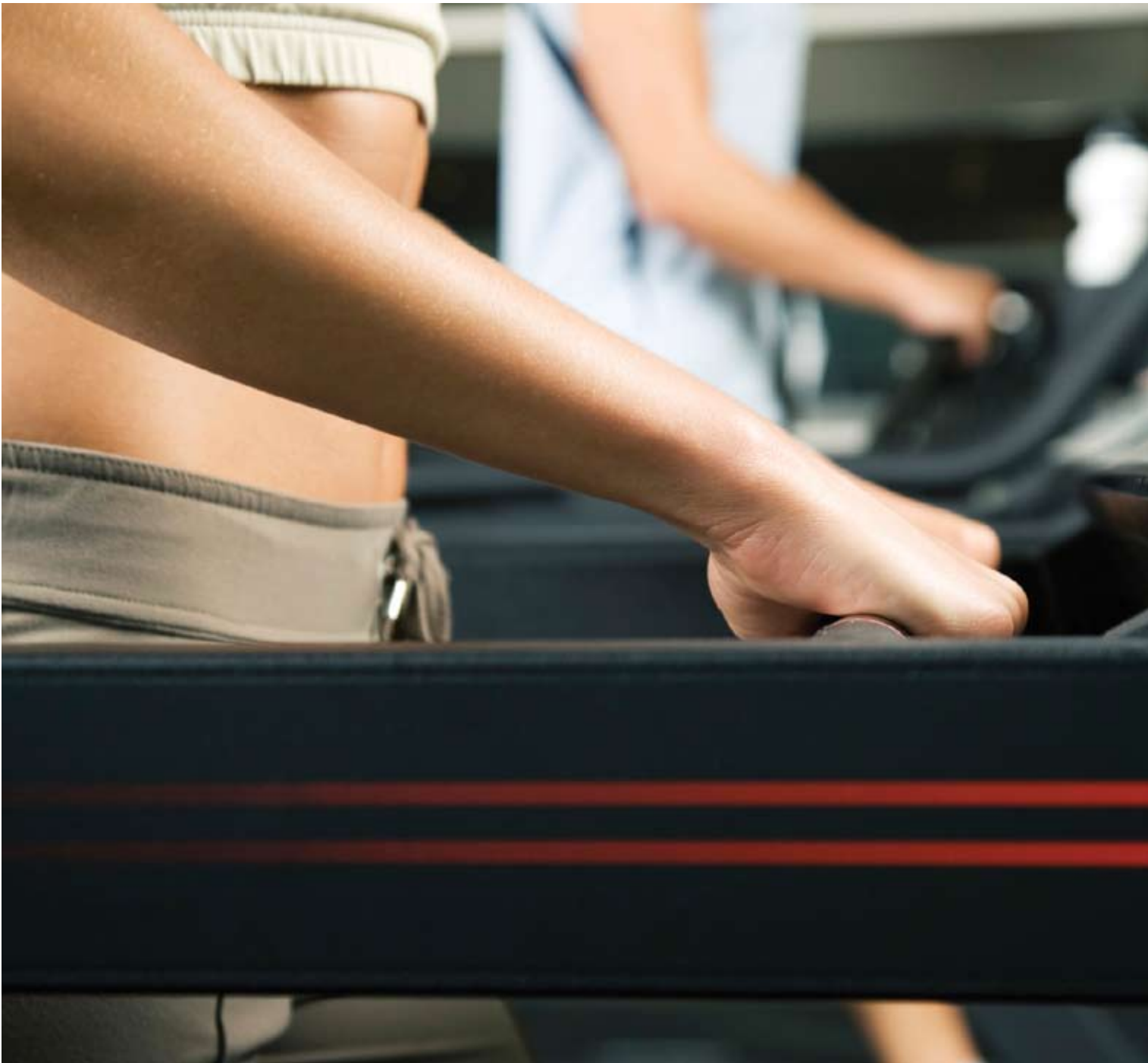
Beyond the exercises, therapists at the Dizziness and Balance Center also test and improve strength and function in feet and legs, if needed. Typically patients have therapy twice a week for four to six weeks and are provided a therapy program to practice at home. "Each person is going to be treated on an individual basis, taking into account their medical condition, lifestyle or individual needs," says Wiedecke.

Ultimately, therapy actually trains the brain to relearn how to deal with erroneous signals it may receive from the feet or the inner ear. As such, explains Dr. Harris, "Therapy can be very helpful to get people back on their feet."

# *The Hospital Gym with* HEART

By LoAnn Halden

The Wellness Center not only boosts fitness but also provides a new lease on life for cardiac patients.



The steady whirl of stationary bikes and the rhythmic beat of feet on treadmills fill The Wellness Center at Broward General Medical Center. An eclectic crowd of hospital employees, former patients and area residents, ranging from thirtysomethings to septuagenarians, work up a sweat in the main room, as a tai chi class quietly unfolds inside the adjacent studio. Wide windows deliver sweeping views of downtown Fort Lauderdale and Port Everglades—an added benefit courtesy of the gym’s eighth-floor perch.

## BACK FROM THE BRINK

Although the sport-minded setup might seem familiar, not all of the participants in this morning workout are typical fitness buffs. On the corner treadmill, 61-year-old Robert Maxwell winds down his workout with confident strides, looking trim and fit; but in November 2006 his prognosis was grim. “I had a massive heart attack and flatlined for over a minute,” says the former mechanical engineer. “They used the paddles five times to get me back. Then they had to induce a coma and couldn’t get me out. I was in cardiac intensive care for almost a month.” Eight months ago, he joined The Wellness Center’s 36-session cardiac rehabilitation program, the only one of its kind in the Broward Health system. On Tuesday, Thursday and Friday mornings, a three-member team consisting of a nurse specialist and exercise physiologists oversees the one-hour exercise

sessions dedicated to helping heart patients reclaim their health. Each class of cardiac rehabilitation patients has a maximum of 10 participants.

“It was probably one of the chief reasons why I’m coming back as quickly as I am now,” says Robert, who has completed the program and continues to work out at the gym. “Most people don’t realize the psychological edge that cardiac rehab gives you. When I got home, I was afraid to move the wrong way; I was afraid to do anything. In rehab, they monitor you and push you to the safe limit. It instills a confidence and lets you know you’re not as broken as you think. Fourteen months ago, I was dead. And now I’m thinking about doing a 5K race.”

## FROM FUNCTIONING TO FIT FOREVER

Cardiac rehab program participants are all connected via telemetry to EKG machines throughout their workouts. In addition, the staff collaboratively monitors the readouts and patrols the floor, all the while checking blood pressures, providing encouragement and also offering both breathing and safety tips.

“Our goal is to get patients back to as much functioning as we can. We want to teach them what to do to prevent another heart problem,” says The Wellness Center’s Leslie Feldman, who has a master’s degree in exercise physiology. “They do cardiovascular exercise three times per week for three months. Two days per week we also do strength training with them, and one day per week is education. Usually you can

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get some considerable changes and develop a heart-healthy lifestyle. Then we also do what is called Fit Forever—the maintenance program. In fact, we have people that have been coming to our program for decades because they feel safe here.”

## A RANGE OF SERVICES—AND CLIENTELE

The cardiac rehabilitation component complements a full range of services at the 5,000-square-foot Wellness Center, including personal training, diabetes education, wellness screening, nutritional counseling, massage therapy and more than 30 weekly classes—all open to the community at large. Memberships don’t require a long-term contract, and non-members are welcome to pay as they go for individual classes, such as aerobics, kickboxing and body sculpting. Yoga, Pilates and spinning are offered in their fifth-floor studio. The Wellness Center staff is certified by the American College of Sports Medicine and the National Strength and Conditioning Association.

“It’s a different clientele than any of the other local community facilities,” says Frank Walters, director of The Wellness Center and sports medicine for Broward Health. “Everyone’s coming in for a specific purpose. For the most part people are focused, as opposed to just needing a place to hang out. We’re not the largest gym, but we’ve got a loyal clientele. It’s an interesting mix.”

Among those approximately 1,600 loyal members is Jim Gill, who

started coming to The Wellness Center more than four years ago. After a year, he signed on as a front-desk volunteer. “I was just looking for a gym close to where I live. Then I got here and discovered all these good things about it, especially the classes,” he says. “The staff is just the best.”

Gill picks up a greeting card from the desk and points to a gym member’s grateful message: “I agree with this,” he says. “Whatever the staff gets paid, it’s not enough.”

## AT A GLANCE

# The Wellness Center at Broward General Medical Center

8th Floor, Physician Office Building  
1600 South Andrews Avenue, Fort Lauderdale  
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