

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 20: A Life-Saving Partnership: Stephenson Cancer Center & TSET Phase 1 Clinical Trials

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Summary: In this episode, listeners meet William Poole, who was diagnosed with cancer and given less than a year to live in 2012. After numerous surgeries and rounds of chemotherapy, he had exhausted all options. But when he discovered the TSET Phase 1 Clinical Trials program at Stephenson Cancer Center, everything changed.

The Stephenson Cancer Center and TSET have a longstanding partnership with benefits that improve the health of Oklahomans. SCC Executive Director Robert Mannel explains how the SCC has become one of the most innovative and prestigious cancer treatment centers in the country.

Dr. Susanna Ulahannan, associate director of the TSET Phase 1 Clinical Trials Program under SCC, shares what sets the program apart from other approaches and why patients like William Poole inspire her passion to continue. SCC and the clinical trials program save lives not just for Oklahomans, but cancer sufferers all across the country.

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[Theme music]

James Tyree: Hello and welcome to the TSET Better Health Podcast. This is James Tyree, a health communication consultant at TSET.

Cate Howell: And this is Cate Howell, TSET podcast producer. Today, we continue our series exploring TSET's medical research initiatives, and this episode highlights some of our most important and rewarding work.

The OU Health Stephenson Cancer Center is a national powerhouse in cancer research and treatment. And TSET has a longstanding relationship with the center that benefits cancer patients and their families across Oklahoma and even the country. The cutting-edge research, clinical trials and medical care that SCC provides have led to some miraculous and life-saving results.

J. Tyree: That's right. The OU Health Stephenson Cancer Center, or SCC, has provided a high standard of care and treatment since its establishment in 2001. Ten years later in 2011, TSET began a formal partnership with Stephenson that provides funding support for the Center's innovative and lifesaving research. SCC Director Dr. Robert Mannel tells the story.

[01:16]

[Somber piano music (“[Inspiring Generation](#)” by Mark Fabian)]

Dr. Robert Mannel: Our vision is simple: to eliminate cancer in Oklahoma and beyond.

J. Tyree: In addition to serving as director of the Stephenson Cancer Center, Dr. Robert Mannel holds the Rainbolt Family Endowed Chair in Cancer, is associate vice provost for cancer programs at the OU Health Sciences Center and is a leading national expert on gynecological oncology. Dr. Mannel said the Stephenson Cancer Center’s very existence came from a critical health need in Oklahoma.

Dr. Mannel: The Stephenson Cancer Center came about in response to one of the most pressing healthcare issues of our day, and that’s the toll that cancer takes on our state’s population. One in two men and one in three women who live in Oklahoma will be diagnosed with cancer sometime during their lives. In this year alone, over 22,000 Oklahomans will hear the words, “You have cancer,” and over 8,000 will die from this disease. Now, to put that into perspective, that’s the highest cause of death for people under the age of 85 in the United States, and it’s the second highest cost of loss of productive life years. Oklahoma, unfortunately, ranks fourth worst in the nation in cancer rate mortality.

So what do we do about this? We have to come together as a team and you have to have a vision and a goal. So in 2001, the state legislature called upon the University of Oklahoma to create a statewide cancer center that would address this pressing health problem for the state of Oklahoma to lead Oklahoma’s effort at education, research, and advanced care, and ultimately, to become an NCI-designated cancer center.

TSET dollars have really helped us to found this mission, to fund it, to allow us to move forward in trying to achieve our vision.

J. Tyree: TSET partnered with Stephenson in 2011 with a five-year grant designed to recruit top scientists to the state, support early phase clinical trials and advance behavioral and cessation research. That support continued well after that initial investment, and it has yielded phenomenal growth for Stephenson and results for patients now and in the future.

Dr. Mannel: TSET has been an incredible partner throughout this journey. And I would say TSET has been more than a partner – it’s been a founding member and a driving force behind our ability to become an NCI-designated cancer center, which we did in 2018, and to elevate the level of cancer care for all Oklahomans. I think that’s really, really important.

TSET has supported the Stephenson Cancer Center and leveraged the resources to pull out philanthropic dollars, state dollars, university dollars, and hospital system dollars to allow us to invest in this vision of creating an NCI-designated cancer center.

J. Tyree: The NCI designation that Dr. Mannel refers to is an elite group of 71 cancer centers in the country that meet rigorous standards of care and research set by the National Cancer Institute, or NCI. When Stephenson Cancer Center first achieved this recognition

in 2018, it elevated the reputation of the center, expanded possibilities for advancement – and the improvement of patient outcomes.

Dr. Mannel: We know that NCI-designated cancer centers improve outcome for the patients who receive their care with a 25% improvement in survival. But it's more than that. It's more than that. It also has to deal with being a resource for all the citizens of Oklahoma and healthcare providers.

J. Tyree: Another important piece of TSET's partnership with SCC is the TSET Phase 1 Clinical Trials Program, which is a tremendous resource for Oklahomans.

Dr. Mannel: In addition, TSET dollars have been used to help expand our clinical trials network. Now, cancer clinical trials are the way that patients can receive the latest, most advanced cancer care. One out of three people that get a cancer diagnosis will still die of their disease. So having these trials available brings the best, latest technology right here to Oklahoma.

The TSET Phase 1 center for clinical trials is a top 10 phase 1 trial center in the entire nation. And we're poised to become one of the top five. Since 2012, over 7,000 Oklahomans have participated in these advanced treatment trials, both adult and pediatric patients. And this includes patients from all 77 Oklahoma counties and 17 surrounding states.

I like to say that participating in a clinical trial provides tomorrow's therapy today. And that's what we want to be there for. But it's also good business. Over \$80 million in contract with pharma companies to bring these novel and exciting cutting-edge drugs have come to Oklahoma to support this type of research.

J. Tyree: Those are some impressive and very far-reaching results for our state and beyond. Dr. Mannel also shared with us the major financial impact that TSET's investment in Stephenson over the years has made for Oklahoma.

Dr. Mannel: It's also important that we recognize that this type of effort, this type of investment is what has allowed us to become NCI-designated, impacting the lives of Oklahomans, providing research which is improving the cancer care delivery as well as outcomes. All the while, stimulating our economy.

Now, if we look at the impact of TSET dollars since our partnership began, it's amazing. The Cancer Center has recruited 67 new faculty researchers to Oklahoma since 2012. These 67 investigators have brought in \$35 million in funding, but since they've been here, have received an additional \$110 million in funding. That's 145 million new grant dollars to the state of Oklahoma between 2012 and 2020. Those dollars are important not only in helping us with our scientific endeavor, but in diversifying our economy and creating a true biotech industry here in Oklahoma.

If you actually put together our grant dollars plus our pharmaceutical contract dollars, we've brought in a quarter of a billion dollars in new external research funding between

2012 and 2020. Now, if you apply the standard three to one economic impact ratio, which is applied to these types of dollars, that translates in to three-quarters of a billion – \$750 million worth of economic impact since TSET has started supporting the Cancer Center. I think that's something that we can all be proud of.

J. Tyree: Despite these fantastic results, a disturbing trend has arisen since the pandemic began, and that is a noticeable drop in preventative cancer screenings.

Dr. Mannel: Prevention comes through two main avenues. The first being preventive strategies, such as vaccination, healthy lifestyle, avoidance of tobacco, and appropriate diet. With those alone, we could reduce the incidence of cancer by nearly 50%.

The other is screening. And unfortunately, I'm here to tell you, even before COVID, Oklahoma ranked in the bottom five of all the states in the nation for screening, and that is a real problem. When COVID has occurred, we've even seen a greater drop off in screening. And this is truly, truly a concern.

You know that the number of reported cancer cases in the United States was between 10 and 15% lower last year than in the previous years. That's not because cancer has gone away. That's because people have either not gotten their screening or they had symptoms and delayed going and seeing their physicians.

So we have to understand that cancer is a deadly, deadly disease. Your best treatment is number one, to prevent it, or number two, catch it early. So if you are having symptoms, if you are having challenges, you need to make an appointment with an appropriate healthcare individual to be evaluated.

And please, keep up with your screening. The best place to find recommendations for screening is on the American Cancer Society website. They go through all screening recommendations, age categories for all the major diseases.

[11:16]

[Uplifting strings music (“[Ok Like This](#)” by Robert Meunier)]

J. Tyree: It goes to show that even with myriad breakthroughs, advancements and benefits, the work is never done. The prevention-based objectives that TSET shares with Stephenson really is more important than ever.

Dr. Mannel: So one of the goals of the Stephenson Cancer Center is to get the message out. You do have control over your own destiny. You, as a patient, as a person, as a citizen of Oklahoma can engage in a healthy lifestyle. Stop smoking. You can get your screening done. You can exercise. You can eat appropriate fruits and vegetables, and get appropriate vaccinations for HPV. These are things that everybody can do. It'll make a huge difference. And the Stephenson Cancer Center is out there to partner with people to do that. We can do that through advertising campaigns, through our mobile health platforms, through our education of not only the community, but healthcare providers.

On behalf of all the healthcare providers, researchers here at the Stephenson Cancer Center, on behalf of the thousands and thousands of Oklahomans that we take care of who have a cancer diagnosis, I just want to express my gratitude to the ongoing support that we receive from TSET and the impact that it's making in this state. It can't be – cannot be – overestimated.

[13:12]

C. Howell: So that's a nice overview of how TSET and Stephenson came together, but what does the science behind that work look like, and how do the patients feel about their care? Let's take a closer look at the TSET Phase 1 Clinical Trials Program.

[13:30]

[Somber blues music (“[Cinematic Bluesy Suspense](#)” by Simon Charrier)]

William Poole: I am William Boyde Poole, a cancer patient at OU Stephenson Cancer Center, in a Phase 1 trial, and very happy to be a part of it.

C. Howell: William Poole values a strong work ethic and built a career right out of high school by working his way up from the bottom.

W. Poole: My background is oil and gas. I graduated high school and went straight into oil and gas service companies from drilling rigs to work oil rigs to anything oil field. And I quickly decided that that's where I wanted to be instead of going to college. And so I stayed with it.

Worked from the lowest position to work my way up to where I actually formed my own company, and I've worked for myself for about 37 years. And we have grown through the process, but the days were always long. There would be times that I would stay awake for four or five days at a time because as long as I had a coffee pot and you had a problem on a well, and that was my driver. I could just stay awake until I got it done and then rest.

So I pushed my body way beyond what it should have been. But I just push, push, push, till I couldn't push, and because my health wouldn't allow it.

C. Howell: Successful though William was, this lifestyle proved unsustainable. In 2012, he received a bleak diagnosis.

W. Poole: I've been on the journey, I was diagnosed back on April 22 of '12, and my world was turned upside down. And so I was forced to change everything about my life.

And I know my body, I feel like very, very well. I just know that, because I've been through so much with the surgery, I think I've had a total of nine, and 26 rounds of what Indiana should refer to as hell's fury.

But shortly after, because it kind of keeps reinventing itself and coming back in a different way or whatever, within six months they found some more nodes that came in that were inoperable, and they couldn't radiate, nor chemo. So I was out of options.

C. Howell: That's when William discovered the TSET Phase 1 Clinical Trials program at Stephenson Cancer Center, and it was immediately clear, he says, that it was the right place at the right time.

W. Poole: The moment that I came here and I had my first meeting with Dr. Ulahannan, I had my wife and my daughters there were with me, and we all left there knowing that this is where God wants us to be. I mean, this is the real deal. And boy was we right in making that decision. And I'm forever grateful to the study and to everyone involved in that.

[16:31]

[Uplifting strings music ("[Follow the Butterflies](#)" by Chris Phaze)]

Dr. Susanna Ulahannan: My name is Susanna Ulahannan. I'm a medical oncologist and I'm the Associate Director of our Phase I Program here at Stephenson Cancer Center.

C. Howell: Dr. Ulahannan has the background and passion to explore unique treatments for unique patients, so when she learned about the TSET Phase 1 program, she was eager to participate.

Dr. Ulahannan: Actually I trained at the National Cancer Institute. I did my fellowship there, so I was introduced to Phase 1 trials and clinical trials early on in my education as an oncologist. And, you know, Mr. Poole is one of the reasons we do what we do, you know, to find treatments in patients who are very fit, who are clinically doing well. They don't have standard of care options, but they want to keep fighting their cancer. They want to do something to fight the cancer that's in them. So our job and why I'm so passionate about research and Phase I trials is to find options outside of the standard of care, finding new treatment options for our patients.

C. Howell: Though the effort to treat and prevent cancer is an ongoing struggle, the field has radically changed over the last few years. Much of that is due to experimentation and early-phase testing on qualifying patients.

Dr. Ulahannan: It used to be, especially in cholangiocarcinoma, many other cancers, the standard of care was only chemo; that's all we had. But now, just in the last couple of years, really, research has opened the doors for completely different treatments. We even have chemo-free options where we look at the molecular profiling, we look at each patient and their mutations, and we see, "Is there anything we can target? Is there any drivers in this cancer so we can stop the cancer?" There is also immunotherapy where we use the patient's own immune system to fight the cancer. It's so different than chemo, because chemo works as long as it is in you, but with immunotherapy and altering the patient's own immune system to recognize the cancer and keep fighting the cancer, it's really been revolutionary in cancer and research.

C. Howell: So how does the trial program really work, and what is its scale?

Dr. Ulahannan: So we're the only Phase 1 unit in the state of Oklahoma, and so we get patients from the state, but we also have patients coming from Arkansas, from Missouri, from Texas. So we have a pretty big uptake of patients. We're one of the top 10 in the country when it comes to number of trials and patients on trials. So we have 60 plus trials open, all the way from first-in-human until those trials where we have expansion in a certain tumor type or in a certain mutation type where we combine FDA-approved drugs with a new drug. So you have the span of very many different types of trials from, like I said, first-in-human until these expansion type trials.

C. Howell: So when William arrived seeking treatment and showed promise as a candidate, Dr. Ulahannan leaped at the chance to help.

Dr. Ulahannan: The key is really finding biomarkers and finding patients upfront who would benefit from these type of treatments. So that's what Mr. Poole and other patients who contribute in these trials, that we do these extra blood tests and extra biopsies to try to pave the way for other patients to be extraordinary responders like Mr. Poole, where we have scans where there is no signs of cancer. I mean, it's just amazing.

[20:33]

[Inspiring piano music ("[Breaking Passion](#)" by Tristan Barton)]

C. Howell: Wait – no signs of cancer?

W. Poole: If I understand it right, I'm understanding that basically there's no signs of cancer at this point.

Dr. Ulahannan: That's right, yep. We have nothing to measure on the scans.

W. Poole: Yeah, yeah, so that's a win, that's a big win for me.

You know, doctors, when I started they basically had given me 90 to 180 days. This April will be 10 years. And a lot of that has to do with Phase 1 getting me to this point because I never dreamed that two years from when I started that I would be enjoying these kind of results and the courage that it takes to try it, and to get in there and do it.

C. Howell: William went from having no options to having no signs of cancer, and the team at SCC was able to get this result with less invasive, less grueling procedures. The care, connection, passion and ambition to try new things sets SCC and the TSET Phase 1 program apart from others like it.

W. Poole: [15:15] At the end of the day, I would not be here if it wasn't for my faith in God and my support from my family and the incredible, incredible, doctor team that we have been blessed with at Stephenson. I never realized we had this kind of expertise and

opportunity in our community. But I'm telling you, this is the best, this is as good as it gets for me right here. [laughs]

Dr. Ulahannan: Mr. Poole is one of the reasons I do what I do. [laughs] People like him, just seeing these type of extraordinary responses, that's why we go to work, to make a difference. When you see what happens with treatment here in the last couple of years and how we've moved treatment and how we treat cancer, it's just changed drastically. And if we don't try new things, if we don't do research to find new ways to treat cancer, we would be stuck with just chemo, treating everybody the same even though it is not the same.

I am very grateful for the TSET Program and the investment that TSET has done here at Stephenson, making it possible to pursue this passion to do research and to find new treatments and new options for our patients.

W. Poole: In the moment that we had our first appointment, I just felt an incredible sense of peace. And like I knew this was where I needed to be. And it had everything to do with Dr. Ulahannan and her team. I just felt like family the moment I met her, and I'm very grateful for that.

The journey has been spooky at times, but at the end of the day, just as long as I wake up and you take it one day at a time. I find the courage and the energy to fight it, and you get through it. It will test your resolve for sure. But to go into it knowing that this was probably my only option, and then to come out on the other side, two years later with the results we got, and it was heaven sent. I can't tell you how thankful that I am to have this opportunity to be in this position. And I thank God and I thank your staff.

[24:20]

J. Tyree: What an inspiring story.

C. Howell: Yeah, absolutely. You know, William also talked about the importance of prevention in terms of proper nutrition, physical activity and caring for your body as a whole. He said that those have become important parts of his life now, and it goes to show that TSET's mission and focus on prevention ties directly into the work Stephenson Cancer Center does.

J. Tyree: That is so true. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is the most effective way to reduce cancer rates, as Dr. Mannel said, and forward-thinking treatments and early phase clinical trials are so important to reducing mortality rates and improving our understanding of diseases. We are so honored to partner with the Stephenson Cancer Center and be part of the life-saving work that they do.

C. Howell: If you'd like to learn more about TSET's research initiatives, you can check out Episode 18 where we take a look at another innovative, top tier research facility in Oklahoma: The Oklahoma Center for Adult Stem Cell Research. We'll take a closer look at the TSET Health Promotion Research Center in a future episode, and Episode 8 provides an overview of all three centers. You can find that and more on our website

tset.ok.gov/podcast or your preferred listening platform. And if you're ready for even more Better Health content, follow us on Facebook [@OklahomaTSET](https://www.facebook.com/OklahomaTSET).

J. Tyree: Oh, I am ready for that content, let me tell ya, Cate.

C. Howell: [laughs]

J. Tyree: But for now, thank you to our special guests, and thanks to you for tuning in. Until next time, this is James Tyree –

C. Howell: And Cate Howell –

J. Tyree: Wishing you peace –

C. Howell: – and Better Health.

[Theme music]

[26:27]