

New physician brings unique specialty combination and new technologies to local patients

A physician specializing in gastroenterology with training in cancer treatment is the latest addition to the Marshall Medical team of doctors providing world-class medical care close to home.

Dr. Benjamin Shepard joined Medical Specialists of North Alabama in July. He will practice gastroenterology at their Marshall South location with Dr. Winter Wilson, Dr. Jeffrey S. Barton and Dr. Allen Goetsch. In addition to seeing patients in that practice, Dr. Shepard will bring his background in cancer care to assist oncologists at Marshall Cancer Care Center in treating gastrointestinal cancer, which include cancers of the colon, bile duct, esophagus, liver, pancreas, peritoneal cavity, rectum, small intestine and stomach.

Rare specialty combination

Dr. Shepard has extensive training with Cancer Treatment Centers of America in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Because of its location, he was fortunate to have the opportunity to do a fellowship in cancer care while he was studying at Oklahoma State University, creating a rare specialty combination.

He plans to work with Marshall Cancer Care oncologists, Dr. Gideon Ewing and Dr. Jonathan Storey, along with pathologist Dr. James Lee, to improve early diagnosis and treatment of gastrointestinal cancer. As a member of the staff of Medical Specialists of North Alabama, Dr. Shepard plans to work as a team with patients, their family doctor and oncologist.

"I like to stay involved with the patient throughout their treatment," he said.



New technology brings big benefits

Thanks to significant investment by Marshall Medical, Dr. Shepard brings new techniques and equipment to the area, including endoscopic ultrasound and ERCP. Endoscopic ultrasound uses an endoscope with an integrated ultrasound probe to create detailed pictures of internal organs and structures.

"Using this probe I'm actually looking outside of the stomach and outside of the intestine," he said. "It's the gold standard for staging esophageal cancers, rectal cancers and pancreatic cancers."

Also, needle biopsies can be done through the scope. A needle can be passed through the scope while positioned in the esophagus, the stomach, or small intestine to biopsy nearby structures. This provides a way to biopsy things relatively non-invasively, that can otherwise be quite difficult to reach.

"This technology is totally new to this facility," said Dr. Shepard, who used it during in his first two weeks in Boaz. "The hospital made a significant investment for this."

Also new is ERCP, a technique used to access the bile ducts and pancreatic ducts. The procedure is done through a scope in the small intestine.

"It's useful for retrieving gallstones out of the bile duct," he said. "Also, it can help with strictures or narrowing of the bile duct, often caused by pancreatic or bile duct cancers. I can place stents in the duct to relieve jaundice, which can often allow chemotherapy to continue after a duct has become obstructed."

Training ensures patient comfort

Having trained in cancer care and seeing patients as part of an oncology team has the added benefit of making Dr. Shepard more at ease with the disease than most physicians.

"Because of the impact on people's lives, cancer is a major source of stress for physicians," he said. "It's so important to be comfortable with cancer care. It brings comfort to the family."

As a gastroenterologist, Dr. Shepard's main goal is to improve access to colonoscopy screening in order to facilitate early detection or prevention of cancer.

"It's our best opportunity," he said.

People who are uneasy about having a colonoscopy should realize any complication is rare. The worst part of the procedure

Gastroenterologist Dr. Benjamin Shepard offers expertise that was not previously available locally.

is the diarrhea caused by the preparation the night before, but the actual exam is typically a breeze and well-tolerated, he said. And Dr. Shepard is willing to try to help patients get over their fear, or, if possible, suggest an alternative screening modality.

There's also a very good side to having a colonoscopy. Seventy-five percent of those screened have no polyps, meaning they are good for the next 10 years.

Statistics show colonoscopies turn up pre-cancerous polyps in 30% of men and 20% of women – which averages to about 1 in 4 patients. The hope is by performing more colonoscopies and finding these polyps early the rate of cancer being found will decrease over time.

Dr. Shepard, 36, was born in northeast Tennessee and grew up in Georgia, becoming a big Bulldog fan. He went back to Tennessee for college and attended the DeBusk College of Osteopathic Medicine at Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate. He completed his residency in the department

of internal medicine at Oklahoma State University in Tulsa. Dr. Shepard also served as a member of the internal medicine teaching faculty at Oklahoma State for a year between residency and fellowships.



Dr. Shepard with staff members (L-R) Maegan Justice, RN; Tonya Cornett, RN; Brooke Higgins, RN; and Courtney Wright, RN (in back).

Dr. Shepard and his wife, Jennifer, were students at East Tennessee State University at the same time but they didn't meet there. The romance started as a long-term friendship when they met at their part-time jobs at Home Depot. They began dating during his first year of medical school, and married just before moving to Tulsa together for his residency. She left her successful marketing career to stay home with the couple's two toddlers.

The natural beauty in North Alabama and Marshall County

helped draw the family to the area. It didn't hurt that Dr. Shepard loves bass fishing. They live in Guntersville.

"We decided to take a look and fell in love with this place," he said. "We've been eagerly awaiting getting here for nearly two years."

Brooke Higgins makes adjustments to the new endoscopic equipment.

