

HARBIN

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address breast cancer patients' special needs

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Atrial fibrillation: What is it? How is it treated?

Rheumatology close to home

Two physicians offer state-of-the-art medical care to arthritis sufferers

By William R. Wilburn



As rheumatologists — physicians qualified by additional training and experience to diagnose and treat arthritis and other diseases of the joints, muscles and bones — Keith Rott, MD (top), and Jeffrey Peller, MD, are the smallest subspecialty of internal medicine.

“One of the exciting things about being a rheumatologist today is that we now have many effective treatments for inflammatory diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis,” said Keith Rott, MD, one of two rheumatologists in Harbin Clinic’s Rheumatology Department in Rome.

“And there are more new treatments in development,” Dr. Rott added. “The message I try to send is: ‘If you think someone has inflammatory arthritis, that patient needs to see a rheumatologist sooner, rather than later.’ Studies have shown that early treatment makes a big difference five or 10 years down the road, with early diagnosis and treatment leading to less deformity and disability and a better quality of life. Once the joint has been damaged, we can’t fix it, but we can usually slow or stop the disease, control it with medications, and allow the patient to lead as normal and active a life as possible.”

Dr. Rott’s thoughts are echoed by fellow rheumatologist Jeffrey Peller, MD. “The single largest part of our practice,” Dr. Peller said, “involves treating rheumatoid arthritis. There have been tremendous breakthroughs in our ability to diagnose and treat rheumatoid arthritis at early phases that permit us, in many cases, to actually stop the progression of the disease.”

A busy schedule

Rheumatologists — physicians qualified by additional training and experience to diagnose and treat arthritis and other diseases of the joints, muscles and bones — are the smallest subspecialty of internal medicine.

They’re also in short supply. “Just having a rheumatologist anywhere is unique,” Dr. Peller said. “The Harbin Clinic has three — two in Rome and one in Cartersville, Nonyelum Ejeike, MD. There just aren’t enough rheumatologists, period, so all three of us have busy schedules.”

Dr. Rott added, “I’m the newest rheumatologist in Rome, but I’ve been busy from my first day.”

Dr. Rott and Dr. Peller

Dr. Rott came to the Harbin Clinic in October 2007 from The Emory Clinic in Atlanta, where he served as a physician and assistant professor of clinical medicine. He also received his medical degree from Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta. He stayed at Emory to complete a residency in internal medicine and a fellowship in rheumatology; Dr. Rott earned his physicianate in microbiology and molecular genetics from Emory.

“I came to Harbin from Emory, where I received excellent training and practiced for four years, but it was time for a change, and I feel fortunate to have found a place like Harbin,” said Dr. Rott, adding that he was attracted to the Harbin Clinic because of its reputation. “Harbin has excellent physicians serving a need in northwest Georgia. I can practice good medicine and focus on taking excellent care of patients. It’s also a congenial place. If I have a complicated patient who needs to see another specialist, I can call up a colleague, discuss the case and get the patient in to see them. I am impressed by the medical community at Harbin and in Rome in

Keith Rott, MD (left), and Jeffrey Peller, MD, are the two rheumatologists in the Harbin Clinic Rheumatology Department in Rome.



general, both by the quality and breadth of care available.”

“Also,” Dr. Rott added, “my wife and I feel good about raising our son in Rome. We all enjoy the outdoor activities that this part of the state has to offer.”

A 22-year veteran at Harbin Clinic, Dr. Peller agrees, “In northwest Georgia, there is no other place to go to see a rheumatologist. But the reality is, even if patients were to go to Atlanta, they wouldn’t see anybody with a higher level of training or access to better lab, imaging or research opportunities than what we have here. Harbin just won’t let anybody have anything better than what we have. That’s an institutional imperative.”

According to Dr. Peller, his staff has access to magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of joints, not just for typical orthopaedic problems, but to specifically look for inflammatory diseases. This allows him and his fellow physicians to detect rheumatoid inflammation oftentimes years before it can be seen on an ordinary X-ray.

“In my two decades here, when people wanted to go somewhere outside of Rome, the most common place for them to go might be the Emory Clinic in Atlanta,” Dr. Peller said. “Dr. Rott was not only trained at Emory, he was a faculty member there. So patients have the opportunity here in Rome to see a physician who was an academic rheumatologist at Emory without having to travel to Atlanta.”

Adding to the physicians’ experience, Dr. Rott also points out the excellence of Harbin Clinic’s electronic medical records system, which allows physicians to view their patients’ records from anywhere in the system. “I can see notes

from other Harbin physicians, labs and imaging reports,” he said. “Harbin physicians can send messages to each other, and the system makes it simple to generate a note quickly to send to the referring physician.”

Teamwork

The value of this technical asset is helpful because rheumatologists frequently require a team of physicians to be involved in the care of their patients. “That often involves orthopaedics,” Dr. Peller said. “My orthopaedic partners bring very specialized

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“If you think someone has inflammatory arthritis, that patient needs to see a rheumatologist sooner, rather than later.”

— Keith Rott, MD,
rheumatologist

expertise to hands, feet and shoulders. The information exchange is unique in that it gives doctors in private practice access to records at all of our local hospitals.

“It has been the overall vision of Harbin to always maintain the highest standards, so my partners have all been wonderful people to work with. We have these ancillary services readily available,” Dr. Peller said. “We have labs on site. We have the most advanced imaging center. We’ve got clinical research. We’ve got well-trained physicians, and we’ve got a great state-of-the-art professional infusion center.”

The infusion center is important to rheumatology patients because some of the more advanced treatments for autoimmune inflammatory diseases are given as intravenous (IV) infusions. Harbin Clinic’s infusion center is staffed by pharmacists and trained infusion nurses. “If you see somebody in solo private practice, they may stick an IV in you themselves, and put you in a little room,” Dr. Peller said. “Here we have the most advanced and skilled people and setting to be able to do our infusions. That certainly sets us apart.”

Yet another thing that sets Harbin Clinic’s rheumatology department apart is its clinical research. Over the years, Dr. Peller has participated as principal investigator in approximately 30 clinical research trials.

“The bulk of the clinical research we’ve participated in has related to medications for rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis,” Dr. Peller said. “It provides our patients the ability to access medications before they are FDA (U.S. Food and Drug Administration) approved to see how it might work for them. It also provides me the opportunity to get some patients on treatments that they otherwise couldn’t afford.”

In addition to rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis, Harbin Clinic’s rheumatologists treat a number of diseases including gout, lupus, osteoporosis, vasculitis and inflammatory myopathies. ■

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