

A lifetime of caring

By Bill O'Neill

When Harold M. Maurer, M.D., diagnosed a young girl with rhabdomyosarcoma in her leg and lung in 1969, the standard treatment was to amputate her leg and to surgically remove a portion of her lung.

Dr. Maurer, at the time a young physician-scientist at the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond, thought there must be a better treatment, so he scoured medical journals for more information. He found nothing.

Ultimately, Dr. Maurer irradiated the tumor in the lung, resected the tumor from the girl's leg, irradiated the post-operative tumor bed and proceeded with a novel chemotherapy regimen.

"She did real well," said Dr. Maurer, who now is the chancellor at UNMC. "At that time, all of the treatments were very radical, and we basically said, 'Time out. There's got to be a more effective way of treating children with this disease.' As it turned out, there was."

By 1972, Dr. Maurer had begun the Intergroup Rhabdomyosarcoma Study Group. He chaired the group for the next 25 years, becoming the world's foremost expert on the disease. The IRSG is credited with raising the cure rate of children afflicted with the disease from 20 percent to 75 percent.

This spring, Dr. Maurer was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Children's Oncology Group, a National Cancer Institute-supported clinical cooperative cancer treatment and research group.

"I'm tremendously honored and humbled," Dr. Maurer said. "To get a Lifetime Achievement Award from all of your peers in the United States, it actually makes me tremble a little bit. It's the greatest kind of recognition that a physician could receive."

Rhabdomyosarcoma is a malignant tumor found in soft tissue of children. The most common sites are the structures of the head and neck, the urogenital tract, and the arms or legs, but the cancer can form almost anywhere. Each body site, when afflicted with the cancer, has its own special problems, Dr. Maurer said.

The cause of rhabdomyosarcoma is unknown. The vast majority of children with the disease do not have any known risk factors. With several hundred new cases per year throughout the United States, the cancer is the fifth-most common cancer found

in children under age 15.

Dr. Maurer was surprised, then, with the lack of medical literature three decades ago. After treating the little girl successfully, he wanted to form a study group, but needed more cases than were available regionally.

In 1972, with funding from the National Cancer Institute (NCI), the Intergroup Rhabdomyosarcoma Study Committee (it

would formally become an NCI-recognized group in the early 1990s) launched an integrative study – the first of four, six-year studies that the group would conduct over the next 25 years. The historical results were not good: only 20 percent of children who were afflicted with the disease in the United States survived.

Over the next two decades, however, that number increased to 75 percent, as hospitals around the country and world began to treat patients based on the research from the rhabdomyosarcoma study group. "It became the gold standard of

treatment," Dr. Maurer said.

Dr. Maurer has authored more than 200 publications and is the editor of a pediatrics textbook and a book on rhabdomyosarcoma. He also has presented at more than 150 scientific meetings and has served on the editorial boards of the American Journal of Hematology, the Journal of Pediatric Hematology and Oncology, and the Medical and Pediatric Oncology Journal.

In 1993, when he came to UNMC as the College of Medicine dean, Dr. Maurer brought nearly \$1 million a year in National Institutes of Health grant money, relating to his research into rhabdomyosarcoma. He stepped down as chairman of the study group in 1998.

Dr. Maurer credits the work of the group for bettering the treatment of rhabdomyosarcoma patients.

"This award isn't about what I've done, but what the people on my team have done all over the world," Dr. Maurer said. "They didn't care who got the credit. They just wanted children with this terrible disease to be treated better and to have better lives. I am glad that in most cases, we were able to achieve that."



UNMC Chancellor Harold M. Maurer, M.D., received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Children's Oncology Group. He is pictured with his wife, Beverly, at the awards banquet.