

November 2025

Fred Hutch Cancer Center
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FredHutch.org

Dear MCC Community,

Thank you for being a supporter of our work in Merkel cell carcinoma (MCC). We're grateful to the participants, advocates, and donors whose partnership drives discoveries that improve the lives of patients and families affected by this rare cancer. This year, we have much to celebrate, and I'm excited to share updates on our team's progress, the impact of our community, and the promising work ahead.

Year One as the MC3 Institute

In January, we launched the Merkel Cell Carcinoma Collaborative (MC3) Institute, which connects researchers at Fred Hutch Cancer Center, UW Medicine, and beyond through a shared mission. To date, MC3 includes more than 100 researchers from 20 institutions across 10 countries. A key MC3 goal is to expand multisite clinical trials, which are vital for advancing treatments for rare diseases like MCC. We're already leading four such studies, with more in development. The Institute also oversees two training programs — one for undergraduate research assistants and another for clinical research fellows. Learn more at mc3institute.org.



MC3 leadership gathered for the MC3 Launch event in Jan. 2025.

NIH Grant Renewal Will Support Over 60 Collaborators

We are thrilled to share that our team received a \$14.3 million grant renewal from the National Institutes of Health. This work will help us understand why only some MCC patients respond to immunotherapy and identify additional therapies for those who need them. The award began in August, will extend through 2030, and supports collaborative research across four institutions — Fred Hutch, University of Washington, University of Michigan, and University of Virginia — involving more than 60 investigators and staff.

New Endowed Chair

We also celebrated the establishment of the Lyn and Daniel Lerner Endowed Chair for Merkel Cell Carcinoma. Shailender Bhatia, MD, the inaugural chairholder, has cared for hundreds of MCC patients and led over a dozen clinical trials to improve outcomes. Director of the Melanoma and Renal Cancer Team at Fred Hutch and professor at Fred Hutch and UW Medicine, Dr. Bhatia will use this flexible funding to continue improving immunotherapies for MCC.

The 20th Merkel CELLebration Dinner

In September, we welcomed over 200 guests to our 20th Merkel CELLebration dinner, where attendees toured the lab, learned about new advances, and connected with fellow patients. If you missed it, you may view a summary and meeting recording by scanning the QR code to the right. **Also, save the date for next year's event: Monday, September 14, 2026!**



“Skin in the Game” Joins Its Second Obliteride

Our Skin in the Game team returned in full force for our second Obliteride — Fred Hutch’s annual bike ride and 5K walk/run fundraiser. With the incredible support of our donors, over 30 team members raised more than \$54,000, a 46% increase from last year. These funds directly support research and clinical outreach at the MC3 Institute.



Team “Skin in the Game”, Sept. 2025

Clinical Trial Aims to Help More MCC Patients

Our multicenter Phase 2 MATRiX clinical trial has completed enrollment. Earlier lab studies showed that ATR inhibitor drugs can help the immune system better recognize and attack MCC tumor cells. This trial, led by our team and sponsored by the National Cancer Institute, is testing whether combining an ATR inhibitor with immunotherapy can stop MCC from growing in patients whose disease didn’t respond to approved immune therapy. So far, 34 patients across 14 sites have joined, and early results look promising. We’re now planning MATRiX 2, which will add radiation to this approach to hopefully make it even more effective.

Monitoring MCC Using Circulating Tumor DNA (ctDNA)

In a study published last year in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology*, we demonstrated that tracking levels of ctDNA — fragments of tumor DNA circulating in a patient’s bloodstream — can help predict early MCC recurrence. Since then, we’ve confirmed that ctDNA is also useful in monitoring disease progression in patients receiving immunotherapy. Tomoko Akaike, MD, a Nghiem Lab member and assistant professor in the UW Medicine Department of Dermatology, presented these findings at an international dermatology conference in December 2024. In partnership with the MC3 Institute, we are now proposing a multisite clinical trial to determine whether starting immunotherapy when ctDNA is first detected — before a recurrence becomes clinically evident — can improve patient outcomes.

Personal Updates

Stephanie and I have acclimated to an empty nest (year 2 now) and love visiting our boys as they find their own adventures. Max is now back for his junior year at Stanford, studying data science, expanding his Japanese, and playing ultimate frisbee. He spent six months in Kyoto this year, where we all caught up with him in May. Our older son, Alex, lives one block from Carnegie Hall in New York City and enjoys working at Duolingo. Max, Stephanie and I are joining him to celebrate his birthday weekend in November. We all found time for our annual cruise in Alaska this summer and will go *very* far south in December — to Antarctica!

I continue to enjoy serving as Chair of UW Dermatology, now in its second year as an independent department at UW Medicine. The extended team is thriving, with 12 faculty members joining us from around the U.S. since we became a department, allowing us to expand clinical capacity by over 40% and help meet the significant need for advanced dermatology care.

Thank You

I am deeply grateful to everyone who stays connected to our work. Your involvement — sharing your stories, taking part in studies, collaborating in care, or giving — helps our extended MC3 Team to pursue better outcomes for MCC patients here in Seattle and around the world. ***These accomplishments would not be possible without your passion and partnership.***

If you are interested in continuing to support this work, please contact Megan Little (mlittle2@fredhutch.org) or Sherri Dotson (sdotson@fredhutch.org) on Fred Hutch’s Philanthropy team or visit FredHutch.org/Support-mc3.

Sending warm wishes for a happy holiday season,

Paul Nghiem, MD, PhD
Founding Chair, University of Washington Dermatology
George F. Odland Endowed Chair in Dermatology, UW Medicine
Affiliate Investigator and Director, Skin Oncology Clinical Program, Fred Hutch
Faculty Founder and Director, MC3 Institute