

## Q&A With Medical Director Stephen Mihalcik, MD, PhD

### What are you passionate about in your field of radiation oncology?

Radiation oncology is a complex field. It actively translates recent, amazing advancements in technology and physics into targeted, invisible beams of energy to eradicate cancers. We work with surgeons and medical oncologists to give our patients the best chance to live long, healthy and happy lives with the fewest side effects possible.

I am incredibly grateful to care for children and adults, and to make a very difficult time a little easier. At Northwestern Medicine Proton Center, we strive to make the most of proton radiation, a still-too-rare resource, for everyone who can benefit from it. Our pediatric patients and their families are central to our mission. Children have the most to gain from the reduced impact of a treatment over the course of their lives.

Radiation oncology is a fascinating and gratifying field. It requires complex thinking, multidisciplinary collaboration, lifelong learning and cultivating complex emotional skills. But, nothing motivates me more than seeing patients thrive during and after their time with us.

### What do you see for the future regarding cancer treatment for pediatric patients?

We are working towards a future where all pediatric patients are cured of their cancers and go on to lead lives that are not burdened by their cancer diagnosis or its treatments. Improvements in radiation treatments are essential to that mission. We at Northwestern Medicine Proton Center are making strides toward that goal every day. We are doing the best we can for every patient and actively advancing the science and medicine of radiation oncology.



Congratulations to Stephen Mihalcik, MD, PhD, who became medical director at Northwestern Medicine Proton Center on July 1.

Dr. Stephen Mihalcik, a radiation oncologist, became the medical director at Northwestern Medicine Proton Center in July 2021. He is on the medical staff at Northwestern Medicine Central DuPage Hospital, Northwestern Medicine Delnor Hospital and Northwestern Medicine Kishwaukee Hospital. He attended Mayo Clinic College of Medicine. There, he earned both his PhD in immunology and his medical degree.

Dr. Mihalcik completed his internship in internal medicine at University of Maryland. Then he went on to residency in the Harvard Radiation Oncology Program with Massachusetts General Hospital, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Boston Children's Hospital and Boston Medical Center. Dr. Mihalcik is board-certified in radiation oncology by the American Board of Radiology.

## Inside

Q&A With Medical Director Stephen Mihalcik, MD, PhD . . . 1
Treating Pediatric Cancers With Proton Therapy . . . . . 2
Clinical Trials . . . . . 3

Is Your Child Afraid of the Doc? . . . . . 4
Blake's Story . . . . . 5
Meet Two Members of Our Care Team . . . . . 5



## Treating Pediatric Cancers With Proton Therapy

Pediatric brain tumors are different from adult brain tumors. They differ in the type of cancers and the approach to treatment. The good news is that advances in treatment methods and technology have greatly improved outcomes including quality of life. Proton therapy, in particular, can reduce long-term side effects. This is thanks to its precision and unique properties of being able to conform to the shape of the target.

Treating pediatric patients presents some unique challenges. This is due to children's smaller size, and the growth and development they have yet to undergo. They can also develop side effects many years after radiation. This is why it is beneficial to reduce radiation exposure to areas close to the target, as is possible with proton therapy. The benefits of proton therapy are substantial and long-lasting. [Learn More](#)

### **Comprehensive Care for Children**

Northwestern Medicine Proton Center participates in a Pediatric Neuro-oncology Clinic with cancer specialists at Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago. The clinic offers a streamlined consultation process for pediatric patients and their families. It also integrates clinical and research services. [Learn More](#)

## Clinical Trials

Northwestern Medicine Proton Center participates in the Pediatric Proton Consortium Registry. This registry enrolls children from all over the country who are treated with proton radiation. Its goal is to better describe the population that receives proton therapy and to better evaluate the benefits and risks of this type of treatment. The data from this study will help make research on proton beam radiation therapy easier. It will also allow for collaborative research and improvements in patient care at Northwestern Medicine and across the U.S.

Northwestern Medicine Proton Center also participates in numerous phase 1, 2 and 3 trials for childhood cancers. This is through two multi-institutional cooperative groups, the Children's Oncology Group and the Pediatric Brain Tumor Consortium.

To learn more about the clinical trials available at Northwestern Medicine Proton Center, visit [protoncenter.nm.org](http://protoncenter.nm.org). [Learn More](#)



## Is Your Child Afraid of the Doc?

### 5 Tips to Prepare for Medical Care

Loud beeps. Masked faces. Needles. Visiting a physician's office or the hospital can be scary.

- 1 Be honest.
- 2 Remain calm.
- 3 Advocate for your child's needs.
- 4 Play when possible.
- 5 Offer your child choices.

Visit *HealthBeat* for more tips from a Northwestern Medicine child life specialist. [Learn More](#)

## Young Patient Receives Precision Treatment for Brain Tumor

Thanks to a school vision screening, Blake's physicians detected a rare brain tumor. It changed the course of his life.

Blake was like any other first grader, enjoying LEGO® building, Star Wars and playing with his little brother, Max. After an eye screening at school, Blake's parents were told his left eye needed to be retested.

A more detailed eye exam with the family optometrist did not raise any red flags. But, his parents knew something was not right because Blake said he saw black spots when his right eye was covered. Blake's parents pushed for additional testing and a visit with an ophthalmologist.

Today, thanks to proton therapy, Blake is a healthy rising fifth grader. Read about his treatment journey. [Learn More](#)



## Meet Two Members of Our Care Team

### Saige S.



#### **Why did you become a child life specialist?**

I went into this field because I wanted to make a difference in the lives of children and their families during an extremely vulnerable time.

#### **What is your favorite thing about being a child life specialist?**

The opportunity to serve as an advocate for the kids and families we see, while partnering with my interdisciplinary team members. And, I enjoy teaching them interventions that they can use to successfully cope with not only the stressful encounters facing them today, but also stressful encounters in the future.

#### **Who or what inspires you?**

The kids I work with on a daily basis inspire me. Kids are so resilient, and their unbreakable spirits are such an example to live by!

### Jarrold W.



#### **Why did you go into the field of radiation therapy?**

I became a radiation therapist for the patient aspect. Getting to bond with patients, and be with them on their journey throughout treatment really intrigued and inspired me,

especially after my mom had her own cancer diagnosis. I felt that I could really help make patients feel comfortable and help their treatment be that much easier to endure.

#### **What is your favorite thing about being a radiation therapist?**

My favorite thing about being a radiation therapist is the patients - being able to bond, build a rapport and eventually have a relationship with them.

#### **Who or what inspires you?**

My patients inspire me - how they're able to keep going and even rise above the hardships and challenges they face every day. It truly amazes me.



To discover if you or a loved one could benefit from proton therapy, please call us at 877.887.5807 (TTY 711).

