First Lady Jill Biden Visits Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center to Spread Breast Cancer Awareness

First lady Dr. Jill Biden traveled to Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center on Saturday to support the fight against breast cancer. She highlighted the importance of cancer screening, research, and survivorship programs.

Dr. Biden and Dr. Stephen Nimer, director of Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center

In a visit to Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center in Plantation, FL, on Saturday, first lady Dr. Jill Biden addressed the significance of breast cancer early detection, clinical research, and the delivery of quality care, in honor of Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

“None of us can beat cancer alone,” Dr. Biden said. “We survive with the love of our families, the dedication of our doctors and nurses, and the support of communities, like this one, that are coming together to fight this disease.”

Dr. Biden was greeted Saturday by Stephen D. Nimer, M.D., director of Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, part of UHealth – University of Miami Health System, and executive dean of research at the Miller School of Medicine. The first
lady was accompanied by U.S. Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz, a breast cancer survivor herself, and Monica Bertagnolli, M.D., the newly sworn-in director of the National Cancer Institute (NCI). Sylvester is the only NCI-designated cancer center in South Florida— one of just two in the state.

South Florida’s diverse community— 43% Hispanic and 24% Black— make it critical to tailor research and care. “Our faculty, staff, and patients reflect the diversity of our region. Furthermore, the patients we enroll in clinical trials at Sylvester also reflect our community,” said Dr. Nimer. “We are able to provide novel therapies for our cancer patients, and the research teams we assemble are conducting research to better understand specific risk factors for Hispanics and Black communities, and others where health inequities may exist. Sylvester is now positioned to accelerate scientific discovery across the United States.”

Tour Highlights Sylvester's Strengths

During a tour of the facility, the first lady spoke with Alejandra Perez, M.D., medical director of the Braman Family Breast Cancer Institute at Sylvester at Plantation, about the emphasis doctors put on risk reduction strategies while serving a diverse community.
“From prevention and screening to treatment and survivorship, Sylvester’s team of physicians, nurses, and scientists are serving our diverse community, tailoring our research and care to best serve our patients,” Dr. Perez said during her remarks following the tour.

In addition to Drs. Perez and Nimer, Dr. Biden met with groups of Sylvester doctors and researchers — Carmen Calfa, M.D., breast medical oncologist and medical co-director of the Cancer Survivorship Program; Patricia Moreno, Ph.D., lead of evidence-based survivorship supportive care; Frank J. Penedo, Ph.D., director of the Cancer Survivorship Program; and Monica Yepes, M.D., chief of breast imaging services — to discuss the clinical research they are conducting and technology their teams are utilizing to facilitate patient care. The teams highlighted Sylvester’s multidisciplinary approach to breast cancer research and care. Dr. Penedo pointed out that Sylvester is leading the NCI’s first Hispanic Cancer Survivorship Cohort Study, which studies how multiple factors, including psychosocial and lifestyle challenges, impact symptom burden, quality of life, and cancer outcomes.

“We also lead work to understand how culturally tailored psychosocial programs can improve the lives of survivors and their families and caregivers in our diverse communities,” said Dr. Penedo. “It’s important our interventions consider culture to be sure they are effective in helping patients.”

**Success in Personalized Care**

Doctors underscored Sylvester’s successful utilization of the “My Wellness Check” portal, an online program that provides patients with a personalized health care experience through virtual questionnaires and access to resources. Our research
Sylvester representative told Dr. Biden, that engagement with the program is associated with reduced emergency room visits and hospitalizations for their patients.

(From left) Dr. Frank Penedo, Dr. Patricia Moreno, Dr. Alejandra Perez, Dr. Jill Biden, and Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz

Sylvester cancer patients Patricia Gainer and Karen Amlong were also among those present during the visit. Gainer was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2011, at the age of 51. After a successful lumpectomy, Gainer believed she was in the clear. Two years later, she was diagnosed with stage four, metastatic breast cancer after experiencing two fractures in her back.

Gainer is now participating in an NCI-funded clinical trial through Sylvester, and she is planning for her future. In a conversation with the first lady, Gainer credited the care she receives from Sylvester for her vibrant quality of life. “At Sylvester, I’m treated as a person, not just a patient,” Gainer said.

Jessica MacIntyre, D.N.P., M.B.A., executive director for clinical operations, and Marisa Maroccia, a clinical research nurse specialist, spoke with Dr. Biden about how their Nurse Navigator program supports patients from diagnosis through treatment with individualized care plans and opportunities to participate in clinical trials.

**Cancer Moonshot Initiative**

The first lady’s visit comes as part of the Biden
administration’s renewal of the Cancer Moonshot initiative. In 2016, then-Vice President Joe Biden launched the Cancer Moonshot with the goal of propelling the nation’s fight against cancer.

Dr. Biden's visit highlighted the importance of breast cancer screening, research, and survivorship programs.

In February, the Biden-Harris administration reinvigorated their efforts. A Cancer Moonshot goal is to reduce the death rate from cancer by at least 50% within 25 years and improve the experience of people and their families living with and surviving cancer. Early detection, prevention techniques, and addressing inequities are part of the plan.

“Early detection is the key to survival, especially for breast cancer. It was for me,” Wasserman Schultz said during her remarks. “Beating cancer, for me, was only the start of my survivorship journey.”

After being diagnosed in 2007, the congresswoman underwent a double mastectomy and several other surgeries to beat cancer. The first lady commended Wasserman Schultz’s strength and courage and cited her as an inspiration for all patients battling cancer.

“Together, we can give patients and their families the care and the future they deserve. That idea of community and collaboration is at the heart of the Cancer Moonshot,” Dr. Biden said.

“While mortality rates have gone down, we have a lot more to
do to end cancer as we know it for everyone,” said Dr. Bertagnolli, who was recently appointed by President Biden to lead the NCI.

The first lady reiterated the significance of scheduling regular exams and highlighted the importance of cancer screenings, especially those delayed or put off because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“As we approach National Mammography Day next week [Oct. 21], I want to remind you that doing our part starts with getting the screenings we need and talking to our loved ones about getting theirs as well,” she said. “We owe it to ourselves and the people who love us to take care of our health.”

Wasserman Schultz, who introduced and passed the Breast Cancer Education and Awareness Requires Learning Young (EARLY) Act in 2009 and the Protecting Access to Lifesaving Screenings (PALS) Act in 2021 to provide women with access to mammograms not covered by insurance, starting at age 40, is now preparing to introduce legislation that aims to provide support to patients from diagnosis through survivorship.

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