

# CenterScope

SUMMER 2022

HEALTH NEWS FROM OUR MEDSTAR WASHINGTON HOSPITAL CENTER



## Orchestrating a cello virtuoso's care

### Inside this issue...

A solution for longstanding, persistent AFib

Managing pandemic stress

Caring for our caregivers

A laser focus on treating burn scars



# Making beautiful music again.

Professional musician is back to entertaining audiences after devastating accident.

Since learning to play the cello at a young age, Benjamin Gates has performed at the White House and Kennedy Center, and for audiences of dignitaries such as members of Sweden's royal family and the ambassador of the Republic of Haiti. His repertoire spans hundreds of classical and modern works on both acoustic and electric instruments, as well as his own compositions.

But when Gates woke up at MedStar Washington Hospital Center's Surgical Intensive Care Unit last January, he had no idea where he was or how he got there.

"I had staples in my right leg and tubes and monitoring machines all around me," he says. "At the time, I didn't know what happened, but it must have been bad."

What happened, Gates later learned, was that he had been struck by a hit-and-run motorist. Unconscious, the 29-year-old was brought to MedSTAR Trauma at MedStar Washington. The impact had left him with multiple injuries, and his care team knew they had to act quickly.

Chief of Trauma Christine Trankiem, MD, likens the response to an orchestra, with the Trauma team serving as Gates' conductor.

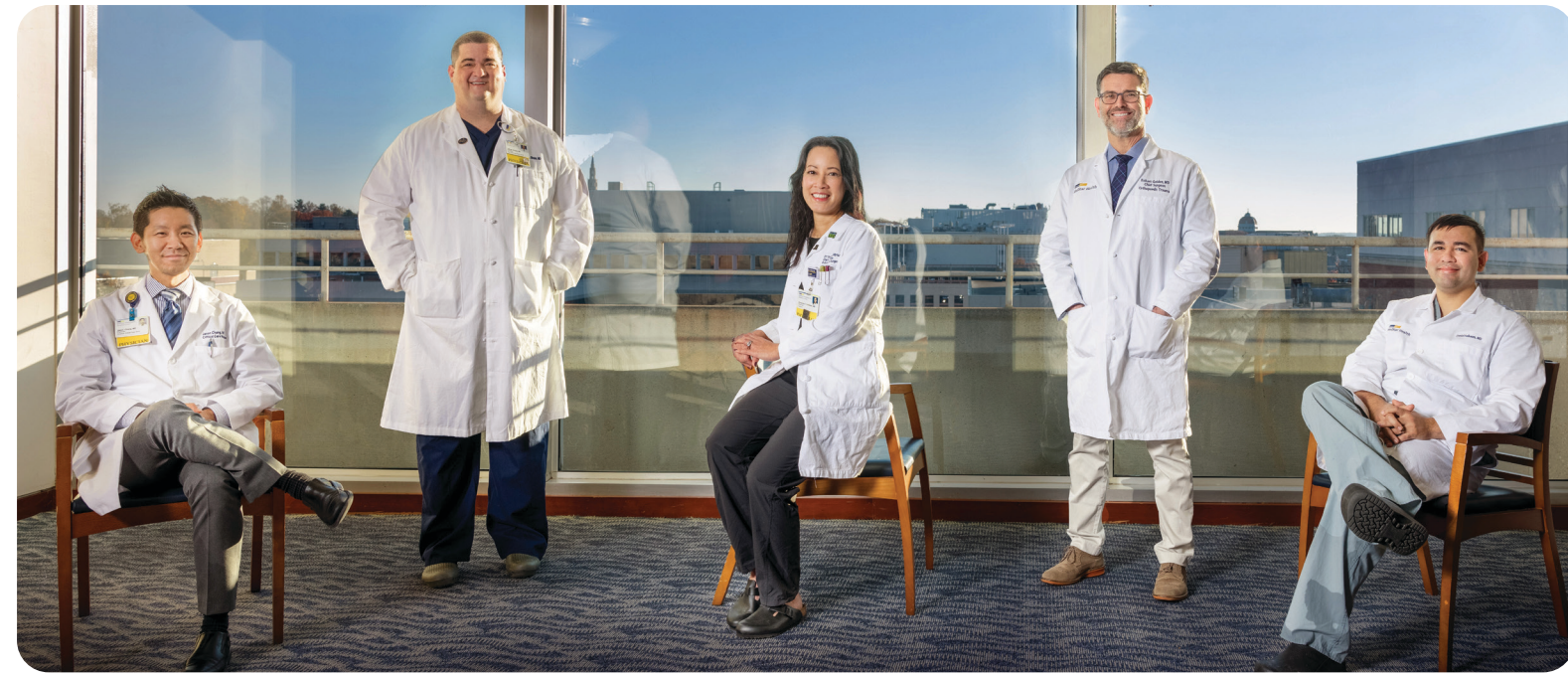
"We coordinated the many other teams who worked together toward his recovery," she says.

Of particular concern was the possibility that Gates had suffered a traumatic brain injury. According to Jason Chang, MD, director of the Neuro Intensive Care Unit, physicians sedated Gates to stabilize his condition and inserted a small tube in his skull to relieve pressure caused by brain swelling.

"The next step was to monitor him closely," says Daniel Felbaum, MD, neurosurgeon. "Our goal was to wean him off sedation when he was ready."

Because Gates had no identification when he arrived at MedStar Washington, there was no way to notify his family. Nevertheless, his mother, Mary Catherine Gates, sensed something was wrong when her son didn't make his usual morning check-in call.

When she finally located him at MedStar Washington, Mary Catherine was allowed only a brief in-person visit in the ICU due to COVID-19 protocols. The sight of her still partially comatose son, "just left me broken," she recalls.



**Benjamin Gates' medical team: (l to r) Neuro ICU Director Jason Chang, MD; Burn Center Director Jeffrey Shupp, MD; Chief of Trauma Christine Trankiem, MD; Chief of Orthopaedic Trauma Robert Golden, MD, and Neurosurgeon Daniel Felbaum, MD**

Fortunately, Benjamin's condition slowly improved, and as he progressed, his mother authorized physicians to address his other injuries. His separated left shoulder had been reset in the Trauma bay, but now Robert Golden, MD, chief of Orthopaedic Trauma, fixed his broken leg and Burn Center Director Jeffrey Shupp, MD, treated his deep skin burn.

## Taking the next steps

Gates spent nine days in the ICU before being transferred to a step-down unit for another week of treatment. He and his mother have high praise for the nurses and the entire team, who regularly made sure he was comfortable and arranged video chats with his family.

"They always came in with smiles, and made sure I got a lot of support," Benjamin says.

The emotional and spiritual support continued when Benjamin moved across the street to MedStar National Rehabilitation Hospital for three weeks of physical therapy.

"So many people say that Benjamin's music itself is very healing," Mary Catherine says. "On the days when he was having difficulty walking, I reminded him that God had protected him, because he still had a lot of work left to do."

Now, more than a year after that near-tragic night, Benjamin Gates considers himself close to fully recovered. He chuckles at the irony that as owner of Asteroid Titanium Musical Productions and Entertainment, he now has a titanium rod in his leg. And despite occasional shoulder and neck pain that sometimes requires him to concentrate a bit harder while holding the cello, he is once again performing at both public and private events, including functions at the National Gallery of Art and other prominent venues throughout the mid-Atlantic region.

Benjamin is very grateful to everyone who played a role in his treatment and recovery, especially given that this all happened during a global pandemic.

"They saved my life, and worked very diligently to make me comfortable," he says. "They kept me connected with my family, which helped reinforce the positive attitude I needed to keep going." Though recovery remains a daily challenge, he adds, "as long as I'm alive and breathing, I'm up for it."

The members of the Gates family (Benjamin, Mary Catherine, Ryann, and Kalynn) are deeply spiritual people and see the care he received as "a blessing." Mary Catherine adds, "One doctor told me that it was a miracle Benjamin was alive and healing the way he has. We strongly believe that God gives doctors the talents they have, and they are the vehicles that create miracles for people."



*"They saved my life, and worked very diligently to make me comfortable."*

—Benjamin Gates



# The Hybrid AF™ Convergent Therapy:

## A solution for hard-to-treat atrial fibrillation.



Physicians at MedStar Washington Hospital Center were the first in the region to introduce a novel approach to treating an advanced type of atrial fibrillation (AFib) called "longstanding, persistent AFib." Two of the physicians who perform this procedure, cardiac surgeon Christian Shults, MD (left), and cardiac electrophysiologist Zayd Eldadah, MD, PhD (right), answer some of the most common questions about the procedure and explain who might benefit.

### Q&A

#### Q: What is longstanding, persistent AFib and what are the symptoms?

**Dr. Eldadah:** AFib is the most common abnormal heart rhythm condition in adults. It affects about 8 million people in the United States, and about half of these patients are considered to have longstanding, persistent AFib, because their abnormal heart rhythm has been present continuously for at least one year.

**Dr. Shults:** Patients may experience shortness of breath, fatigue, dizziness, chest pain or pressure, and a rapid or irregular heartbeat. AFib is a progressive condition that becomes more challenging to treat if left unaddressed. It can cause a higher risk of stroke, as well as damage to the heart itself, leading to heart failure and/or heart valve leakage, for example. Symptoms may also be very mild.

#### Q: How is it usually treated?

**Dr. Eldadah:** The longer that AFib is present, the more difficult it is to treat. AFib is caused by erratic electrical signals within the heart that typically start with brief episodes that then progress to being present all the time **1**. Patients do best when their heart rhythm is normalized **2**. Lifestyle changes, medication, electrical or chemical cardioversion, and catheter- or surgical-based ablation are examples of techniques used to restore normal heart rhythm. People with advanced AFib likely already have tried a number of therapies to achieve this goal.

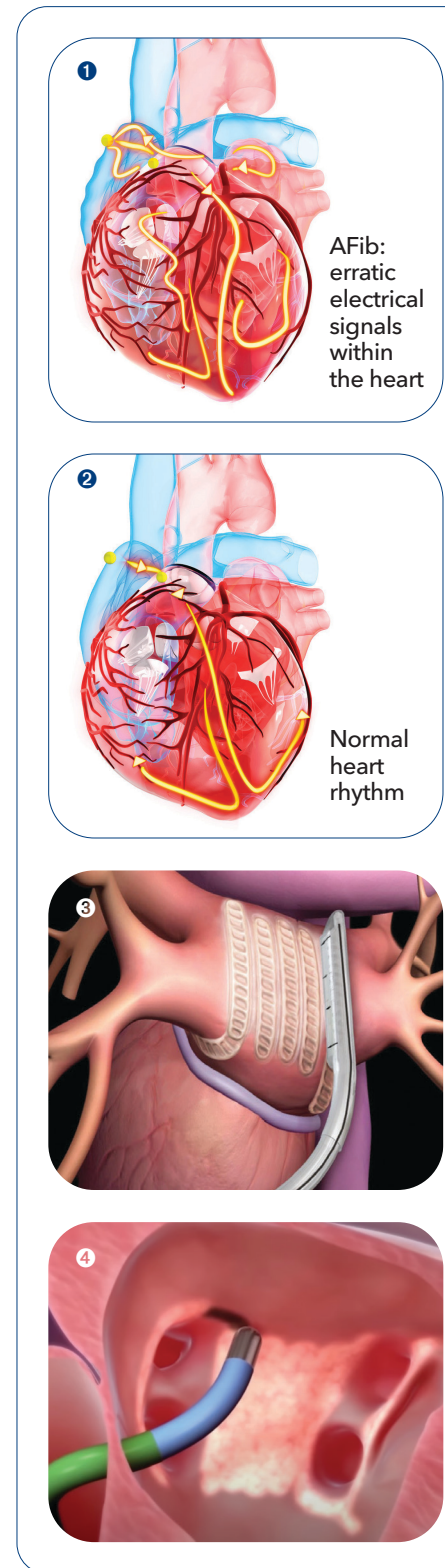
**Dr. Shults:** These are all appropriate ways to treat some types of AFib, but for more advanced cases, the resolution may only be temporary. Many patients with advanced cases often have had several ablation procedures, yet their AFib still returns. Fortunately, there is now an effective treatment available. It's called convergent ablation.

#### Q: What is convergent ablation?

**Dr. Shults:** This procedure offers a solution for people who have run out of options—it provides hope for many. Working together, a cardiac surgeon and a cardiac electrophysiologist treat both the inside and outside of the heart. By using this hybrid, collaborative approach, we can reach and treat the critical areas of the heart from where AFib may be originating.

The procedure takes a few hours. First, as the cardiac surgeon, I make a tiny incision in the chest to gain access to the heart. Then, I administer painless bursts of heat (ablations) to create tiny lesions, or scar tissue, on the outside of the heart **3**.

Most patients stay in the hospital for two to three days after the surgical portion, and because only tiny incisions are used, the recovery is shorter, and discomfort is less than with other surgical procedures.



**Dr. Eldadah:** Next, a cardiac electrophysiologist like myself, inserts a catheter in a vein at the top of the thigh and guides it to the heart using state-of-the-art tools including x-ray and three-dimensional mapping systems. We create similar lesions inside the heart **4** and on nearby veins. These lesions help eliminate the erratic electrical signals that cause AFib. This part of the procedure can be done on the same day as the surgical part or a few weeks after the patient is discharged following the surgical procedure.

#### Q: What are the results?

**Dr. Eldadah:** A major clinical trial showed that this approach is safe and more effective than other treatment options for longstanding, persistent AFib. With this procedure, we can reverse some of the damage that AFib has caused, improve symptoms, and often reduce the need for some medications. We are seeing excellent outcomes—more than 70 percent of patients remain free of AFib and related symptoms a year after their procedure.

#### Q: Is it safe?

**Dr. Eldadah:** Although convergent ablation recently has been studied specifically in people with longstanding, persistent AFib, it is actually a very well-established technology. In fact, our physicians introduced the procedure to the region in 2011 and have been performing it ever since.

**Dr. Shults:** MedStar Health doctors have performed more than 300 of these procedures—more than any other system in the mid-Atlantic region. Procedures are safest and most effective when performed by specialists with high-volume expertise.

If you think you may have longstanding, persistent AFib, a specialist can confirm your diagnosis and help you understand your treatment options. To make an appointment, please call **844-218-4800**.



# The body's response to stress and ways to manage it.

Stress is a common, natural condition that everyone experiences. During the pandemic we've all suffered stress to one degree or another, and it affects every part of the body.

Acute or urgent stress triggers the "fight-or-flight" response, causing the release of stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones cause sweating, increased blood pressure, rapid heartbeat, and shallow breathing. If stress persists and becomes chronic, however, it can cause harmful inflammation throughout the body.

MedStar Washington Hospital Center specialists explain ways stress can attack the body, and share tips for managing it.

## The heart.

The release of hormones over a long period means higher blood pressure, changes to the cholesterol metabolism, and heart inflammation. This can weaken the heart, increasing the risk of heart attacks, strokes, and a condition called stress cardiomyopathy or "broken heart" syndrome.

"It's important to manage your stress," says Allen Taylor, MD, cardiologist.

Some tips:

- Exercise regularly.
- Consider meditation or yoga.
- Make time for friends and family.
- Get enough sleep.
- Find a hobby that distracts you from negative thoughts.

**For an appointment with a cardiologist, call 855-970-2196.**

## The gut.

"The gut-brain connection is very complex," says Nikiya Asamoah, MD, gastroenterologist. If you touch a hot stove, your brain directly signals you to move your hand. With the intestines, however, the signals come from a combination of hormones, nerves, bacteria, and the immune system.

"You may have abdominal pain, upset stomach, and changes in your bowel habits related to stress," says Dr. Asamoah. "Interestingly, diagnostic tests of the intestines are typically normal, but intestinal function is not, and this is the aim of treatment."

Dr. Asamoah suggests talking with your doctor about anti-anxiety or anti-depressant medications, talk therapy, or even hypnosis.

Options to try on your own:

- Avoid caffeine, especially coffee.
- Practice deep breathing, mindfulness, and meditation.
- Find time to relax.
- Watch your diet (fatty, sugary, and/or processed foods appear to increase stress).

**For an appointment with a gastroenterologist, call 202-877-7108.**

## Mental health.

Psychiatrist Elspeth Ritchie, MD, says, "The pandemic is cause for anxiety, but we have also faced constantly changing rules about masks, socializing, and vaccines, which have caused added stress."

The most common ailment she sees right now is the inability to fall asleep or stay asleep. Here are some tips:

- Go to bed at the same time every night.
- Exercise, but end a workout several hours before bedtime.
- Cut out caffeine by mid-afternoon.
- Avoid alcohol before bedtime.
- Put down electronics an hour before going to bed.
- Keep your room cool and dark.

As for stress, Dr. Ritchie suggests focusing on what you can control, rather than what you can't, and try some of these other tips as well:

- Perform small acts of kindness.
- Spend time with family, friends, and/or pets.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Try meditation, yoga, or deep breathing.

## The skin.

Dermatologist Allison Larson, MD, says stress can cause new skin problems to develop or existing ones to flare up. Chronic stress can lead to itching (eczema), skin or nail picking, hair loss, acne, cold sores, and shingles.

Dr. Larson says, "It's important to focus first on the underlying stress and then what you're doing for your skin. Music, talking to a friend or therapist, and exercise can reduce stress."

Addressing the skin conditions can involve many therapies:

- For skin-picking disorders: try a stress ball.
- For itching: place a cold cloth over the affected area.
- For more serious cases: use topical and oral medications.

If wearing a mask or using hand sanitizer causes skin irritation, try perfume-free, thick cream or ointment moisturizer.

**For an appointment with a dermatologist, call 301-951-2400.**



*Glenn Wortmann, MD, section director, Infectious Diseases, has been a COVID-19 spokesperson for MedStar Health during the pandemic.*

We are in a much better place than in January 2020. There were all those unknowns: Do masks work? Are there enough to go around? Which is the best? There was no vaccine, no way to test for the virus, and no treatments. We couldn't diagnosis, treat, or prevent. Those were rough times, and we're definitely better off now.

A lot of unknowns remain, though. COVID-19 strikes people differently, although common risk factors include being elderly, having other serious medical problems, and not being vaccinated. A vaccine that completely protects everyone from getting COVID-19 would be great, but we don't have one. The vaccines we do have, however, are very effective against preventing hospitalization and death.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are the best places to get accurate information.

**Visit them at [CDC.gov](https://www.cdc.gov) and [COVID19.who.int](https://www.covid19.who.int).**



# Creating the new *Best Place to Work.*

Center for Wellbeing helps relieve stress and supports MedStar Washington Hospital Center associates.

“Ask me about my son!”

Crystal Morales, MS, RN, the director of Nursing Wellbeing for MedStar Health, was greeted by a smiling nurse she recognized. The nurse looked completely different this time. A month ago, she was stressed and upset, worried about accessing mental health care for her teenage son, who was dealing with depression. She had spent weeks trying to find an available therapist. Morales had connected the worried nurse with counseling services through the MedStar Health Employee Assistance Program—and the nurse’s son is doing great.

Since COVID, Morales and other members of the wellbeing team have been visiting patient units regularly for staff “wellness rounds,” bringing a wagon filled with treats, information, and ideas for stress relief. She often stops to lead brief exercises and talk with associates. It was during such a visit that Morales met the concerned nurse and found a way to help.

Wellbeing at work is no longer just about health fairs and weight-loss competitions. Thanks in part to the challenges of more than two years at the front lines of a global pandemic, the personal and professional wellbeing of those working in health care received accelerated attention. At MedStar Health, that attention included:

- Emergency back-up child and elder care
- Peer to peer support
- Resilience coaching
- Counseling

- Expedited mental health appointments
- Financial planning
- Workflow improvement efforts
- Wellbeing visits at the worksite
- Training in Stress First Aid, a comprehensive stress management program.

These efforts have been so successful, MedStar Health announced a new Center for Wellbeing to provide support for all 36,000 associates, and the center will also conduct research into wellbeing best practices.

“Pre-COVID, we already had serious concerns about issues like burnout, workplace violence, the burden of student debt,” says Daniel Marchalik, MD, a urologic surgeon at MedStar Washington Hospital Center and the executive director of the new center. “We started working on solutions then.”

Dr. Marchalik was appointed director of physician wellbeing in 2018 and began to reimagine a field where healthcare providers are comfortable admitting that they need help.

MedStar Washington Hospital Center President Gregory Argyros, MD, was an early advocate. “A top priority for any business should be its people,” he says. “Making them feel supported with the resources they need to better do their job, or just giving them the opportunity to talk about their feelings can make a valuable difference. They need to know that it’s okay to not be okay. Being open and transparent allows you to establish a culture where people feel fully supported.”



(Top to bottom) Heather Hartman-Hall, PhD, Crystal Morales, MS, RN, and Daniel Marchalik, MD, lead the MedStar Health Center for Wellbeing.



Wellbeing rounds give our nurses a chance to relax and recharge during their shifts.

## Award-winning programs help associates manage stress.

A special part of the wellbeing program is the *Here for You* campaign that goes to the departments where healthcare providers work. Most do not sit at a desk; rather, they are in and out of patient rooms, interacting with each other, families, and other providers. The wellbeing team now provides coaches, psychologists, and nursing team members who visit the operating rooms, units, clinics, emergency departments, and ambulatory spaces where the healthcare teams work. The effort expanded quickly during the pandemic crisis to include:

- A 24/7 peer support hotline
- Recharge stations at hospitals for meditation, relaxation or a snack
- Wellness rounds to patient units as mental health “check-ins” and support
- A new regular podcast, *Scrub In*, geared towards caregivers but about topics applicable for everyone
- Training for associates who want to support their peers
- An expanded *Care for the Caregiver* program to provide emotional support for caregivers
- Resilience coaches working with individuals and teams in clinical locations.

Another vital wellbeing tool is *Stress First Aid*, a collaborative stress management tool developed by the military for combat use. Heather Hartman-Hall, PhD, the wellbeing team’s clinical director for Behavioral Health Initiatives, adapted it to the healthcare field. More than 800 associates participated in her two-day training sessions to learn how to identify stress early and seek help.

Others are taking note. In 2021, MedStar Health earned the Joy in Medicine™ distinction from the American Medical Association (AMA), which recognizes health systems that demonstrate a commitment to preserving the wellbeing of healthcare team members.

“The past two years have highlighted the exceptional and unique role of healthcare workers and the many ways we need to grow our recognition of their work and support for their personal and professional wellbeing,” said Dr. Marchalik. “Now we are moving beyond burnout and the crisis of the pandemic to tackle the mental health distress and trauma that our healthcare workforce feels in the wake of the pandemic. It’s critical to retaining and re-engaging clinicians in this field.”



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our MedStar  
Health team?  
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# A Laser Focus on Treating Burn Scars.

## Laser Scar Revision Improves Patients' Quality of Life.

For patients who suffer a burn, the first and most important step is to heal. Skin is our body's largest organ, protecting us from germs, helping us regulate body temperature, and giving us the protective sensation of touch.

The next step, however, is to ensure patients have the best quality of life possible after a burn, which may mean helping them manage scars. When burned skin heals, scars often develop. Because they are made up of tighter, denser, stiffer skin, scars can be painful, sensitive, and itchy, and they can make movement difficult.

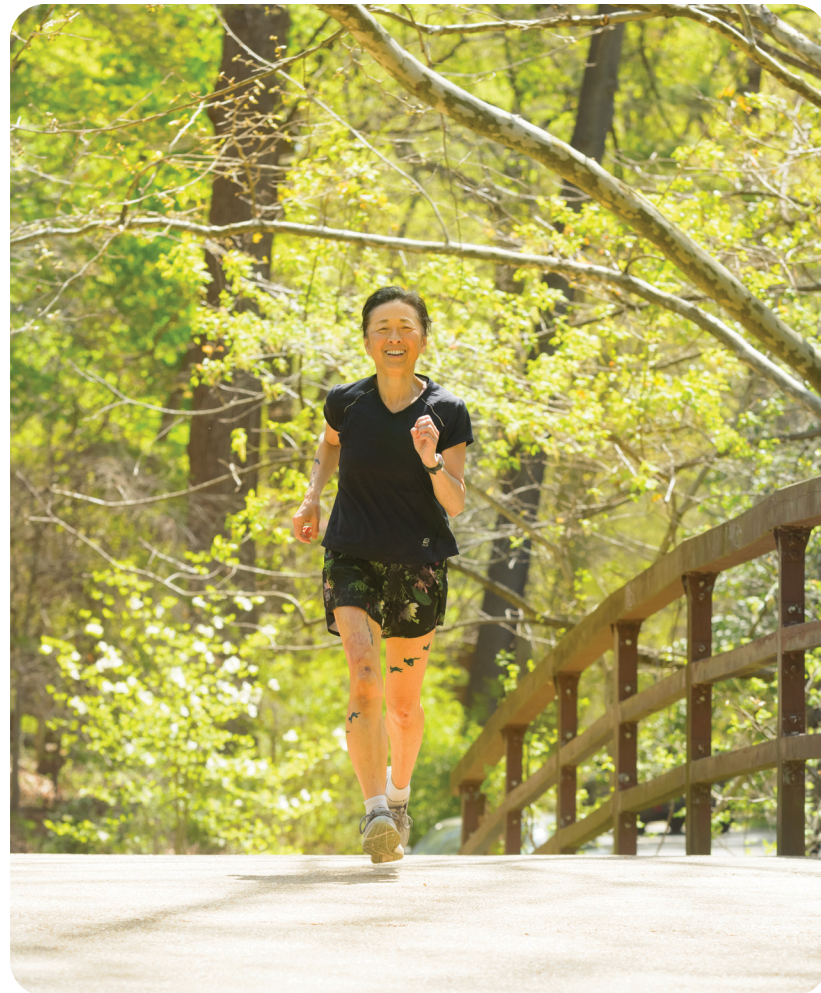
For Kyoko Mori, scarring was a significant hurdle. While baking pita bread one day, Mori fell across the open door of her 425-degree oven and suffered a serious third-degree burn across her thigh and the area above her knee. As she healed, she developed a thick, painful scar, which was sensitive to heat and itched intermittently throughout the day.

Fortunately, Taryn Travis, MD, and the team at The Burn Center at MedStar Washington Hospital Center offered a treatment option called laser scar revision. With high-powered laser treatments, Dr. Travis can help scar tissue relax, improve pain and itch, and make the scars smaller and thinner, often allowing patients to return to their daily routines more easily.

"While the skin will never be fully back to 'normal,' it will become much more like uninjured skin, it will feel better, and it can look better, too," says Dr. Travis. "But more importantly, we can improve patients' quality of life by resolving frustrating itching or painful tingling, and by giving patients better range of motion."

Mori's scar was thick, raised and red before treatment, and it has now become softer and less itchy and painful after treatment, she said. Mori was also impressed that the laser scar revision was largely painless.

Laser scar revision can begin as soon as an injury heals, but is also helpful for patients many years after a scar has formed. Impressively, more than 96 percent of Burn Center patients have documented improvements, such as increased range of motion, thinner scar, reduced pain, and lessened itch after a single treatment. Patients make additional improvements with each subsequent procedure.



**After a serious burn, Kyoko Mori had painful scars, but after laser scar revision, she is back to enjoying the outdoors—her passion.**



**Laser scar revision helped Sergeant Westerbeck get back to protecting the citizens of Washington, D.C.**



PHOTO BY KEITH WELLER

**Burn Surgeon Taryn Travis, MD, treated Kyoko Mori and Matthew Westerbeck, reducing pain and itching and allowing both to return to their work and hobbies.**

Laser scar revision also helped Matthew Westerbeck, a sergeant with the Washington, D.C. Fire Department. In September 2020, Sgt. Westerbeck and his company were responding to a car fire when the vehicle exploded just 18 feet away from him. He suffered second-degree burns on his face and neck, and started receiving laser treatments one year later. Now, after three treatments, he is seeing significant improvements in his ability to move his facial muscles, and his face is not as sensitive to heat and cold, important improvements that enable him to get back to fighting fires.

Sgt. Westerbeck feels fortunate. "As firefighters, we're very lucky to have access to the care at MedStar Washington Hospital Center. I know I'm fortunate to be here—and it's a great feeling knowing tomorrow is a new day. These laser treatments will make my scars smaller and make life a little bit easier on me. That's the ultimate goal," he said.

**If you or someone you love is experiencing difficulty with scarring, contact our specialists at 202-877-7347 for a consultation.**





# MedStar Health

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## MedStar Heart & Vascular Institute marks launch of new robotic cardiac surgery program.



Brian Cohn of Northwest Washington is returning to his active life after undergoing the first robotic mitral valve surgery performed by Yuji Kawano, MD, at MedStar Washington Hospital Center.

Cohn was diagnosed with mitral valve regurgitation, a common condition in which the heart's two mitral valve leaflets, or flaps, don't function properly, allowing blood to flow backward—in the wrong direction.

"This is such a leap forward and I am so lucky to have met Dr. Kawano and his team," said Cohn.

Dr. Yuji Kawano, director of the new robotic cardiac surgery program at MedStar Washington, has extensive experience with the procedure, having previously performed more than 200 robotic heart surgeries and over 2,000 heart and vascular surgeries.

"Combining the precision of robotic instruments with a high-definition 3D camera, we are now able to perform intracardiac procedures through very tiny incisions in the chest using the da Vinci® surgical system," said Dr. Kawano. "Robotic surgery is an excellent option for patients seeking quicker recovery and less post-surgical pain, without compromising the clinical result of the surgery itself."

The robotic cardiac surgery program at MedStar Washington is the first in the area to serve the southern Maryland, greater Washington, D.C., and northern Virginia region.

With a robotic approach, surgeons slip instruments through five very small incisions, all less than one-inch wide, between the ribs and through the chest wall. These tools have a wider range of motion than the human hand, allowing for more intricate movements and increasing the precision of the surgical technique. The robotic approach reduces the risk of post-surgical complications and shortens hospital stays. Patients also experience much less pain during their recovery.

"Robotic cardiac surgery is an exciting and important next step in the evolution of the MedStar Washington Hospital Center cardiac surgery program," said Christian Shults, MD, interim co-chair of the cardiac surgery program at MedStar Health. "Our cardiac surgery program is already recognized as one of the largest and most experienced in the entire country. Robotic cardiac surgery is the latest example of our ongoing tradition of clinical innovation and excellence."



CenterScope is produced by the Marketing Department of MedStar Washington Hospital Center 110 Irving St., NW Washington, DC 20010.

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Some of the photos in this publication were selected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. All patients and providers are expected to follow the current MedStar Health guidelines for safety, including proper masking and physical distancing where appropriate. Learn more at [MedStarHealth.org/Safe](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/Safe).