H an Zentil was a poster girl for healthy living. The 38-year-old filled her spare time with rock climbing, tennis and stand-up paddle boarding in the surf lapping her hometown of Laguna Beach. In between, she kept watch over a husband, two young children and a thriving real estate business.

Then one day about a year ago, she sat in a chair, leaned back and felt a hard lump in her right shoulder. “It felt like a pingpong ball under my skin,” Zentil says.

After seeing three doctors, one of whom told Zentil the lump was “nothing,” she arrived in the office of Dr. Bang H. Hoang, director of the UC Irvine Health Multidisciplinary Sarcoma Center and associate professor of orthopaedic surgery. The lump wasn’t “nothing.” It was a chondrosarcoma, a rare type of bone cancer diagnosed in fewer than 500 Americans a year.

Hoang, a nationally recognized expert in sarcomas, told Zentil and her husband, Tony, that surgery to remove the mass could leave her with limited use of the shoulder — especially tough news for someone with Zentil’s energetic interests. He would do his best, Hoang said gently before introducing them to other specialists on staff.

“We walked out of there with our heads spinning,” Zentil recalls. “But it felt so good to know there was such a network of research and information,” a center where experts collaborated and were versed in the latest advancements.

“We felt this is where we were supposed to be,” Zentil says.

Now recovered with a fully functional right shoulder, Zentil is once again rock climbing, paddle boarding and playing tennis. She is awed by the fact that she found a world-class specialist for her rare cancer right in Orange County.

“We drive up and down the I-5 Freeway every day, passing the medical center, and we don’t know the miracles going on there,” she says.

Focus on Leading-Edge Treatment

It was not just a stroke of luck that Zentil found the care she needed in her own backyard. The UC Irvine Health Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center is the product of years of dedicated work to establish a top-of-the-line cancer center in the heart of Orange County.

Today, the cancer center serves patients with nearly every type of cancer — among them brain, breast, digestive, skin, gynecologic, head and neck, blood, lung, musculoskeletal and urologic. Since 1984, the center has been recognized by the National Cancer Institute as a comprehensive cancer center, a national mark of excellence and the only one in Orange County.

“Chao means the center has gone beyond the normal delivery of care and has thought about cancer in its entirety — from prevention to the delivery of care to survivorship to long-term follow-up of patients — and with the integration of research in everything we do,” says Dr. Leonard S. Sender, director of clinical oncology services at the Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center. “The delivery of tomorrow’s care is what we do today.”

The center is staffed with leading authorities in specific areas of cancer care, including Dr. Philip Di Saia, a leading proponent of hyperthermic intraperitoneal chemotherapy. The approach represents the latest and best option for advanced ovarian cancer.

“Dr. Philip Di Saia, the previous chief, established a longstanding track record of excellence in gynecologic oncology here at UC Irvine,” Nelson says. “Dr. Bristow is dedicated to sustaining that level of excellence and innovation.”

For more information or to make an appointment with a UC Irvine Health cancer specialist, call 714.456.8000 or visit www.uchchealth.com

UC Irvine’s NCI Designation Signifies ‘Best and Brightest’ in Cancer Care

T ypically, only 10 percent of people with a brain cancer called glioblastoma multiforme survive for five years. But treatment at the UC Irvine Health Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center is hardly typical. Here, patients with this type of cancer not only receive leading-edge care, they also have access to a highly promising clinical trial aimed at preventing recurrence of the disease.

Dr. Daniela Bota, a neuro-oncologist, is leading a Phase 2 clinical trial of a glioblastoma vaccine made with white blood cells and protein antigens extracted from the patient’s tumor. The vaccine — made with the patient’s own activated white blood cells — is injected into the patient to help the immune system recognize and attack remaining cancer cells.

It’s ingenious, and the results of studies so far suggest it significantly extends survival.

This kind of a novel study could only take place at a “comprehensive cancer center,” a designation bestowed by the National Cancer Institute to recognize institutions with state-of-the-art programs in cancer treatment and research. The Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center is one of 41 such centers nationwide and the only one in Orange County.

“Faculty members who are part of NCI-designated cancer centers are among the best and brightest in the nation,” says Dr. Edward L. Nelson, chief of the Division of Hematology-Oncology. “Because the center is charged with advancing the field, you get the most cutting-edge treatments by individuals who know the most about a given tumor.”

At comprehensive cancer centers, teams embracing many specialties and disciplines usher promising research into tangible advances as quickly as possible. Patients may enroll in clinical trials for new treatments not available elsewhere in the community. At the Chao center, groups called disease-oriented teams have been formed to improve the treatment of skin, colon, prostate and women’s cancers.

“It’s a way to facilitate interactions between the basic scientists and clinicians and to have fertile ground for new ideas to take hold,” Nelson says.

For example, Dr. Robert E. Bristow, director of the Division of Gynecologic Oncology, offers an innovative treatment for women with advanced ovarian cancer called heated hyperthermic intraperitoneal chemotherapy. The approach represents the latest and best option for advanced ovarian cancer.

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Becoming a Cancer Survivor

The pathology report showed Zentil required no further treatment. Last summer, the Zentil family celebrated her recovery with a paddle-boarding “paloalto” — paddling across 40 California lakes over four weekends. The publicized quest was on a mission to raise money for UC Irvine Health cancer patients who need assistance with meals and transportation during treatment.

Then one morning, paddling on a lake so calm it was if she was gliding over a piece of glass, Zentil was filled with gratitude.

“The primary goal was to take out all of the cancer and save her life. That was the first priority,” Hoang says. “But I hoped by recreating the muscles, I could preserve some of the function,” allowing her to have nearly full use of her shoulder and arm and to resume her athletic pastimes.

“I feel like I have a second chance after this,” Zentil says. “I wasn’t just a patient. I was a contributor.”

For digestive cancers we have created a critical mass of the right people,” Sender says. “We have developed an amazing portfolio of options for those patients. We’ve done that by putting together a sophisticated team of experts.

Another program, in urologic cancers, is renowned for pioneering surgical techniques such as robot-assisted, minimally invasive prostate cancer surgery. Thomas Ahlering, a national authority on urologic cancers, has developed surgical techniques to significantly minimize such side effects as sexual dysfunction and urinary incontinence in men with prostate cancer.

Team Approach to Care

Lan Zentil, however, wasn’t the least bit interested in published papers or national awards when she checked into UC Irvine Medical Center for surgery in late January 2012.

What she needed the most during her seven-day stay — in addition to skilled surgery — was some reassurance, a kind word, a smile. Her caregivers met that challenge, too.

“He was there every day,” Zentil says. “My shoulder was in a sling, and the number one thing I wanted to do was to go to the restroom on my own. The second thing was to take a shower. There was one nurse who said, Don’t worry, honey. I’ll wash your hair. The way she did it was so loving. And sometimes she would just sit by my bedside and talk to me.”

During a five-hour procedure, her doctor had removed the cancerous shoulder blade and painstakingly rerouted muscles to retaining healthy bone.

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UC Irvine Health neuro-oncologist Dr. Daniela Bota is researching a treatment for brain cancer that uses the patient’s own cells to attack the disease.