

An Expanded Rehab Program Helps Head and Neck Cancer Patients in Brooklyn



A Rusk Brooklyn speech and language pathologist works with a patient whose voice box was removed and replaced with a tracheoesophageal voice prosthesis (TEP), allowing him to create a voice to speak again.

More Information

To learn more about head and neck cancer rehab, contact Kara Nizolek, PhD, at 718-630-7425.

NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn's first patients with these complex diseases have benefitted from a new partnership between the Perlmutter Cancer Center—Sunset Park and Rusk Rehabilitation.

Head and neck cancers typically involve tumors within the mouth, throat, and upper airway, with about 65,000 Americans developing such malignancies annually. Patients often require surgery to remove the tumor and sometimes the area surrounding it, with serious effects on a person's speech, swallowing, and breathing function. That's why rehabilitation—in which speech and language pathologists (SLPs) help patients to speak and swallow safely again—is so crucial.

When head and neck cancer surgeon [Lindsey Moses, MD](#) joined Perlmutter Cancer Center—Sunset Park in September 2022, patients facing this complex disease were, for the first time in the hospital's history, able to get care at NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn. Within weeks, the team at Rusk Rehabilitation in Brooklyn, led by Kara Nizolek, PhD, site director for rehabilitation services, mobilized to partner with Dr. Moses' staff, which includes radiation and medical oncologists, to provide comprehensive care for this new patient population.

By the time Dr. Moses performed the hospital's first total laryngectomy (removing the voice box) in January 2023, Nizolek had created a clinical workflow in which Rusk Brooklyn's SLPs worked with patients from pre-surgery to acute care to outpatient rehabilitation. Today, the SLPs begin their interventions as soon as a patient is diagnosed, developing a relationship and providing extensive education with the person before their operation, working with them post-surgery while in intensive care, then helping manage any complications. They also work with head and neck cancer patients who don't require surgery, but who instead are treated with chemotherapy and radiation.

"The SLPs at Rusk Brooklyn have become a critical part of the care team," says Dr. Moses. "Just as patients who have orthopedic surgery need to follow it with excellent physical therapy, head and neck cancer patients need top-tier speech and swallow therapy. Without excellent rehabilitation efforts, function after surgery or cancer treatment can be poor."

Treatment is usually long-term and patients often require the use of prosthetic devices to help them speak and swallow again. "The SLPs focus on each patient's specific needs, whether it be to regain swallowing function after surgery to remove a portion of the tongue, or teaching someone to speak again after having their voice box removed," Dr. Moses adds.

Nizolek points out that post-surgery can be a physically and emotionally turbulent time for patients. Her SLPs, working for NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn and the Family Health Centers, "monitor the patients very closely," she says. "If they encounter something wrong, such as a prosthetic that's leaking between the esophagus and the trachea, we collaborate with Dr. Moses and her team, and vice versa. Our patients can

reach out and get support from us seven days a week, if something needs troubleshooting.”

Rusk Brooklyn has also developed a new monthly hybrid support group, which meets virtually and in-person, for these patients and their caregivers. “You’re really not able to speak after these extensive head and neck cancer surgeries, and have a lot of difficulty with breathing,” says Vincent Cavallaro, vice president of neurology and rehabilitation services at NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn. “The support groups provide critical support and guidance. Having patients participate in various phases of their recovery is imperative, because when you see someone managing and thriving with a prosthetic device maybe six months out, or two years out, or ten years out, you see there is hope. More established patients take new patients out to dinner to help them adjust to eating in public again. It’s truly inspiring to see.”

As for the future, the team aims to build continued awareness that patients fighting head and neck cancer can get surgery and rehabilitation in Brooklyn. Dr. Moses and the Rusk Brooklyn SLPs held a screening event in April in Sunset Park and will continue to do outreach in surrounding areas.

Sums up Nizolek, “We’re proud to have developed this program for this patient population, and we’re here to support them every step of the way. We strive to continue to expand our comprehensive services to all head and neck cancer patients in Brooklyn.”