

# CINCINNATI BUSINESS COURIER

## COVER STORY

# 'THE ULTIMATE HONEST BROKER'

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**A**ny time a new employee joins the ranks of the University of Cincinnati Cancer Center, Dr. Bill Barrett makes sure they receive one very important document. The single sheet, five-paragraph paper outlines his personal philosophy for care. Peppered with words like “opportunity” and “obligation,” it demands patients be treated with dignity. Working at the Cancer Center, Barrett said, is “not just a job.”

The same could be said of Barrett’s latest initiative – a first-of-its-kind second opinion service for cancer patients in Greater Cincinnati. Rolled out with zero fanfare, the initiative, Cincinnati Cancer Advisors, is picking up steam.

Second opinions are vital. They provide reassurance and additional information to those newly diagnosed. They can ease confusion and help plot alternative courses of care. But actually securing one can be a delicate situation. Health care is historically competitive, and physicians often get defensive about being second-guessed. Barrett, it seems, has managed to sidestep those obstacles. Best yet, the services are free.

### 'An objective second opinion'

Cancer stats can be sobering. Around 45% of all men and 35% of all women will develop some form of cancer in their lifetime, Barrett said. In Hamilton County, breast, lung and prostate cancer rank as the most prevalent. Last year, Cincinnati Cancer Advisors saw patients who presented with more than 40 types.

Barrett’s idea is to offer a high-level consult service. With a traditional second opinion, a patient often travels out of town, which is inconvenient and expensive, and there’s rarely good communication between oncolo-



## DR. BILL BARRETT

**Founder, Cincinnati Cancer Advisors; co-director, University of Cincinnati Cancer Center; medical director, UC Health Barrett Cancer Center; chairman and professor, UC department of radiation oncology**

**Education:** Bachelor’s, University of Virginia; medical degree, University of Cincinnati

**Focus areas:** Prostate cancer, cancer of the head and neck, and the use of radiation seeds as well as external radiation therapy

gists. For the treating physician, there’s the possibility his or her patient could be poached.

Cincinnati Cancer Advisors is agnostic, meaning it’s not meant to compete with other health care systems in the region. There’s no attempt to recruit the patient away.

“It’s a completely objective second opinion,” Barrett said. “The ultimate honest broker, if you will.”

Barrett informally launched Cincinnati Cancer Advisors in 2016, offering second-opinion services to patients on weekends, testing his model solo before demand eventually grew. In January 2020, the organization added Dr. Phil Leming, who co-founded and developed the medical oncology department at Christ Hospital, to the team. Leming works alongside nurse practitioner Jill Hunt.

In February of this year, Dr. Abdul Jazieh also came aboard. Jazieh, who served as professor and chief of the hematology and oncology department at the University of Cincinnati from 2000-2006, is the former chairman of oncology at King Abdulaziz Medical City in Saudi Arabia. He returned to the Tri-State to see patients and develop Cincinnati Cancer Advisors’ international program.

Cincinnati Cancer Advisors services are free, specifically to residents who live within a 25-mile radius of downtown. That fact alone seems spectacular in the face of ever-increasing medical costs, but Barrett would not be deterred from his original mission. His initiative is funded solely by the Cincinnati Cancer Foundation, a nonprofit he also quietly launched in recent years. That foundation targets donors interested in giving to a smaller organization but one that is still dedicated to fighting cancer in Cincinnati.

**Sound off:**

“He’s so beloved. He almost becomes your family doctor. He never stops work and his phone never stops ringing. He’s never going to let you give up.”

– **Steve Abbott**, executive director, Cincinnati Cancer Foundation

**DR. PHIL LEMING**

**Medical oncologist and hematologist, Cincinnati Cancer Advisors; founding member of the Cincinnati-based organization, Melanoma Know More**

**Education:** Bachelor’s in zoology, University of Kentucky; University of Louisville Medical School

**Focus areas:** Melanoma and complex skin malignancies, immunotherapy

**Sound off:** “The fact Phil is doing this is tremendous. If you took a poll of who has been the best oncologist in Cincinnati over the last 35 years, Phil would be on that list. It is natural for people to get defensive or concerned about being second-guessed. Phil has done a fantastic job of finessing that.”

– **Dr. Bill Barrett**

**DR. ABDUL JAZIEH**

**Senior oncology consultant, director of innovation and research, director of international programs, Cincinnati Cancer Advisors**

**Education:** Master’s of public health from Tulane University in New Orleans; doctorate of medicine from Damascus University in Syria

**Focus areas:** Hematology, lung cancer, immunotherapy

**Sound off:** “Abdul is one of the best known people in cancer worldwide. He sees the value of second opinions and how we can continue to make this better.”

– **Dr. Bill Barrett**

**JILL HUNT**

**Oncology nurse practitioner, Cincinnati Cancer Advisors**

**Education:** Associate of applied science, University of Cincinnati; bachelor’s in nursing, Indiana Wesleyan University; master of science in nursing, Indiana Wesleyan University

**Experience:** Cincinnati Children’s Hospital, Cincinnati Hematology Oncology

**Sound off:** “Jill and Phil see patients together, and they’ve been doing this for many years. They are a very unique team and pick up on things the other one didn’t see.”

– **Dr. Bill Barrett**

## CINCINNATI CANCER FOUNDATION AND CINCINNATI CANCER ADVISORS

The organization is directed by a 14-member board.

Members are:

- ▶ **Ron Joseph**, Joseph Automotive Group
- ▶ **Brendan White**, Fort Washington Investment Advisors
- ▶ **John Shepherd**, Shepherd Chemical
- ▶ **Tim Fogarty**, formerly West Chester Holdings
- ▶ **Jim Sowar**, Deloitte
- ▶ **C. Francis Barrett**, Barrett & Weber
- ▶ **J. Kenneth “Ken” Blackwell**, former Ohio Secretary of State
- ▶ **Dr. Thomas Herzog**, University of Cincinnati Cancer Center
- ▶ **Dr. Bill Barrett**, University of Cincinnati Cancer Center
- ▶ **Neville Pinto**, University of Cincinnati
- ▶ **Joyce Elkus**, marketing consultant and Musicians for Health co-founder
- ▶ **Lucinda Heekin**, former attorney and president, Last Best Place Catalog
- ▶ **Florence Koettters**, philanthropist and community volunteer
- ▶ **Stuart Aitken**, Kroger

"It's been more individual people, who have been touched by cancer and appreciate the importance of this, because they've been through the journey, and they know how confusing it was," Barrett said.

When a patient is seen at Cincinnati Cancer Advisors, the team spends about two hours with them, reviewing their individual case. Afterward, the medical team consults with physicians from around the country with expertise in that particular field. The patient is brought back in for a followup, which includes a written report, all the while communicating with the treating oncologist about recommendations for care. The Cincinnati Cancer Advisors team estimates, in total, they spend roughly eight hours on each case. A typical clinician visit, by comparison, clocks in at 20-30 minutes.

"It's been highly successful," Barrett said. "Based on surveys patients have sent back, most consider it the best medical experience they've ever had. The physicians, instead of being defensive about possibly being second guessed, are reassured. They gain extra information they may not have had. The idea is for everybody to up their game."

Dr. Rekha Chaudhary, a hematologist and oncologist at UC Health who specializes in primary brain tumors, routinely refers her patients to Cincinnati Cancer Advisors. If a patient has questions or is in need of additional options and information, having this kind of "cancer concierge" close by is invaluable. It saves the patient a trip out of town to Cleveland Clinic or MD Anderson.

Many times, in those instances, patients get the very same answer they've already received locally.

"They've wasted time and resources, and it's all very stressful," Chaudhary said. "The fact that they (Cincinnati Cancer Advisors) are here but are not taking the patient (is) an advantage. I don't think it's competitiveness, but there's fear from some physicians that they're going to be seen as less than by the patient. The patient has to trust you implicitly. They have to trust your judgment in the end. It's reassuring to them and to me."

## TEE OFF

The Cincinnati Cancer Foundation will host its first-ever golf outing and fundraiser, "Bearcats & Musketeers vs. Cancer," Sept. 13 at Maketewah Country Club. The event pays homage to the intense rivalry between the University of Cincinnati and Xavier University and will benefit cancer research at the University of Cincinnati Cancer Center, the nursing program at Xavier University and Cincinnati Cancer Advisors. Each foursome will consist of both Bearcats and Musketeers supporters, and the after-event will feature a casual dinner, an open bar and live auction. Cost is \$275 per registered golfer. Cincinnati Cancer Foundation anticipates this being an annual event. More information is available at [BearcatsvsMusketeers.org](https://www.bearcatsmusketeers.org).

## 'There was no way I was going to let cancer take me down'

When Paula Maier, an Indian Hill resident and lifestyle writer, received her breast cancer diagnosis in June 2020, her first call was to her husband. The second was to Dr. Leming at Cincinnati Cancer Advisors.

The news wasn't a complete shock, she said. There's a strong history of cancer in her family, and Leming had treated her brother and mother. But the experience at Cincinnati Cancer Advisors bolstered Maier's belief that she was doing the right things. She still calls the office to run questions by staff as an extra precaution. Cincinnati Cancer Advisors heavily encourages that due diligence.

"I never felt like this was going to kill me," Maier said. "I'm strong, I'm sassy, and there was no way I was going to let cancer take me down. But to have the team be calm and say, 'This is the best way to handle this,' gives you so much more confidence."

Steve Abbott, an Edgewood resident, former CPA and seven-year prostate cancer survivor, had been seeing Barrett practically since the onset of his diagnosis. This past spring, when Abbott's PSA, or prostate-specific antigen, numbers kept going up, and Barrett couldn't figure out why, he referred Abbott to Cincinnati Cancer Advisors for a second opinion. Leming and his team found a clinical trial in Ann Arbor, Mich. – testing a new type of PET scan –

**"This whole thing is a work in progress, a pilot project."**

and the test conclusively discovered Abbott had three different cancerous lesions that were subsequently treated with radiation.

Abbott was so impressed by the experience, he told Barrett he wanted to get involved, thinking that there might be a volunteer opportunity. He's now serving as Cincinnati Cancer Foundation's executive director.

"The early signs are that (the treatment plan is) working, because the numbers are coming down, and it's a direct result of coming here," he said.

Since the Cincinnati Cancer Advisors team has grown, Barrett has taken a more back-seat role. Thus far, office space is adequate. The team is based in Norwood and patients are seen inside a medical building on Montgomery Road. But there's a legitimate concern that Cincinnati Cancer Advisors could soon outgrow the space.

Demand for the service continues to increase. Anecdotally, the phone rings more and more each day, Abbott said. And according to Barrett, patient count could top 500 by the end of 2021. As of April, 320 new patients had been seen, a 45% increase year-over-year.

"We're hoping we won't be overwhelmed, but that is a possibility," Barrett said. "This whole thing is a work in progress, a pilot project."

While Barrett contends Cincinnati Cancer Advisors is unique, the only offering of its kind in the world, Abbott did discover something similar. TheSecondOpinion is a San Francisco-based nonprofit that has been providing free services to adults in California diagnosed with cancer for over 50 years. More than 60 oncologists, pathologists and sub-specialists volunteer their time. It's a model that piques Abbott's interest. If a similar organizational structure could be applied here, Cincinnati Cancer Advisors could have an "exponential reach," he said. The two groups have made initial contact.

"The linchpin is (Barrett)," Abbott said. "He's so revered in this town, if people knew he was involved, they would be honored to donate their time."

As far as his own prognosis, Abbott said a second opinion gave him a 2-year head start on his treatment plan. In the cancer world, that's huge. Not only that, he's also living out his dream career, he said. He's recruited friends to the center by posting on social media and is active in the V Foundation, a cancer research group founded by the late basketball coach Jim Valvano, as well as the American Cancer Society.

"I want to use my experiences to help people," Abbott said. "This is the closest I can ever come to feeling like I'm making a difference with cancer patients." //

