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Northwestern doubles down on neurology

By NONA TEPPER

Northwestern Medicine quietly has been building out its department of neurology and neurosurgery over the past few months, hiring big names and opening new treatment and research centers in a play to boost its bottom line and move up the national rankings.

The new hires include Dr. Roger Stupp, a Swiss neuro-oncologist from the University Hospital of Zurich in Switzerland who developed the protocol that Sen. John McCain is following to treat his brain cancer. This treatment involves an oral chemotherapy drug and radiotherapy.

"He's widely considered as the most influential living neuro-oncologist in the world," said Dr. Maciej Lesniak, the chair of neurosurgery for the health system.

So far, the department has added six specialists to its staff of 200. Two new neuro-oncologists joined the **Department of Neurology and Neurosurgery in** early August. Neuro-oncologists are trained to diagnose and treat patients with brain and nervous system tumors. And next month, Dr. Daniel Brat, a neuropathologist formerly of the Emory University School of Medicine, will also start at Northwestern. A physician who studies, diagnoses and treats diseases related to the brain nerves and spine, he will be the second neuropathologist on staff.

In July, the health system launched the Northwestern Medicine Movement Disorders Neurogenetic Clinic, one of the few neurogenetic centers in Illinois to serve both adults and children. Physicians at the clinic make customized therapies for patients based on their genetic makeup, said Dr. Dimitri Krainc, chair of neurology at Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

"Neurology is a little special in the sense that it's basically incurable as of today," Krainc said. "So, it is very important for us to see those patients in clinic and help them as much as we can, but it's also important to help find cures for these diseases."

In fiscal 2016, the department performed more than 2,200 surgeries and recorded nearly 13,500 patient visits.

Neurology is a particularly lucrative line of business, says Allan Baumgarten, an independent health care analyst based in Minneapolis. That's partially because the field is "procedure-heavy"—and, he says, "procedures today are well paid by Medicare and commercial insurers."

But it makes sense to double down on neurology and neurosurgery, too, because many emerging growth illnesses—think brain, spinal cancer and movement disorders—also fall within the field. "I'm sure they've studied the anticipated volume for those services" in the coming years, Baumgarten

said. "And the fact that they've projected an upward trajectory is another very good reason" to build out these services.

Recently **U.S. News and World Report named Northwestern Memorial Hospital** the 9th best place in the nation for neurology and neurosurgery as well as the top spot in Illinois. But there's some competition locally, including from Rush University Medical Center, which the magazine ranked 17th nationally in these fields. Regionally, Cleveland Clinic, the University of Michigan Hospital and Health Centers and Barnes-Jewish Hospital in St. Louis also rated highly. National competitors include the Mayo Clinic, Johns Hopkins Hospital and Massachusetts General Hospital.