

Stroke Survivor...from Page 1A

EMS transported Cannon to a nearby landing zone set up at old Hiawassee City Hall to meet the chopper as it arrived for the 20-minute flight to Northeast Georgia Medical Center; by contrast, driving via ambulance would have taken upwards of an hour and a half to reach the same destination.

In Gainesville, Cannon was immediately taken for specialized surgery conducted by Dr. Sung Lee, medical director of Neurointerventional Surgery there. It was a textbook response for best possible outcome, resulting in Cannon's release from care two days later and subsequent total recovery.

As it turns out, she had been suffering from a large blockage in her brain, and with emergent conditions like Cannon's, "time is of the essence." Neurointerventional Technologist Kyle Powers said.

Powers works on the team in Gainesville, and he said even slight delays in treatment can cause lifelong impairment or even death, which is why rapid response is so important when it comes to strokes.

"You lose about 1.9 million brain cells per minute in a large vessel occlusion, and she had a significant presentation that looked like a big stroke, so Junior knew that the need for her to get to our Neurointerventional Team pretty rapidly was of the essence," Powers said.

In recognition of the tremendous result, Powers brought a film crew to Towns County on April 1 to chronicle the intervention, visiting the campground where the stroke took place, the landing zone, EMS building and 911 center, recording local people's experiences from that day.

The footage will be compiled into a "Patient Testimonial Video" that the hospital system hopes will create awareness about strokes and recognizing them,

as well as awareness about the new Neurointerventional Team, which is the closest such team serving the region.

"This is to celebrate her story, to celebrate the good work that Towns County (first responders do) day in and day out for the citizens and visitors of this county," Powers said. "It takes all of us working together for good outcomes, regardless of the emergency you're trying to treat.

"Whether it be a cardiac emergency, a stroke emergency, trauma – it takes a village to take care of these people, and it all starts right here in your local community with your EMS providers."

Already, many stroke patients from Towns and Union counties have benefited from the new team at Northeast Georgia Medical Center, and the hospital aims to debut Cannon's story online in time for National Stroke Awareness Month in May.

Of course, everyone was happy to be involved in a project featuring such a good outcome, and it served to reunite many of the folks who played a part in saving Cannon, who phoned in from Florida to speak with people and share her story.

"I'm just so grateful for those guys up there," Cannon said. "It just went bam, bam, bam – I didn't even have time to really think about it. I had cancer 21 years ago, and then to have this happen, I just feel like I have a whole new lease (on life).

"Someone was watching after me ... I have a bunch of angels, and I am so blessed. I can't thank the people in Georgia enough. They made me feel like I was just a part of their family. They were just wonderful."

Paramedic Chastain realizes that the stars aligned to bring about the best possible outcome for Cannon, and he was thrilled to be able to speak with her last week, especially considering that she could have lost her ability

to speak altogether.

"This was the first time I got to talk to her since the date of the incident," Chastain said. "It's a blessing; we never get to follow up on the patients. Used to, you dropped a patient off and you never heard anything else from them or about them, ever.

"In this case, for her to call and speak to me and thank me, and just the feelings that came through her voice – it was just a blessing. It made me emotional. She was talking about how she was going to get to spend another Easter with her grandkids and children. It's a very good feeling."

And thanks to her quick treatment, Cannon has reported general improvements to her wellbeing and stamina, which were likely impacted prior to the stroke by the occlusion that caused her stroke.

Towns County EMS Director Ken Nicholson has been in the profession since 1982, and he said stroke care has advanced considerably over his career.

It wasn't too long ago, Nicholson said, that the best outcome for most stroke patients was a toss-up between eventual recovery in the hospital and transfer to a nursing home for long-term care.

But much of that has changed in the last 20 years or so with modern interventions, including the ones now available in Gainesville's Stroke Program, which Nicholson said puts life-saving treatments closer by half the distance to the next available hospital.

The Neurointerventional Lab at Northeast Georgia Medical Center opened in November 2020 to become the closest hospital performing what's known as mechanical thrombectomies – the exact procedure that pulled Cannon back from the brink during her major stroke.

"We're honored to be able to provide this service at Northeast Georgia Medical Center," Powers said, "but really what we want to highlight is the excellent service that Towns County EMS provides

to this area, and the importance of the public's awareness of stroke symptoms.

"EMS providers have had such a challenging year with COVID, however, this doesn't mean that these time sensitive emergencies have stopped happening. They show up every day, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to take good care of people, and a lot of it can easily go unnoticed."

People can read up on stroke symptoms by visiting <https://www.nghs.com/stroke-care>. A handy acronym is BE FAST, which tasks people with being able to recognize issues with a suspected stroke victim's Balance, Eyes, Face, Arms and Speech, and to seek help in a Timely manner.

"Call 911 immediately at any sign of a stroke," per the website. "The acronym BE FAST helps you remember that when a stroke strikes, seconds count, and recognizing the sudden onset of any of the ... symptoms can save someone's life."

COVID Uptick...from Page 1A

social norms were upended, public events were canceled, and for a while, life in many quarters seemed to have lost much of its color as people fretted about the virus.

People are still concerned – and rightly so – but the picture is starting to look decidedly rosier. The positivity rate is down from an all-time high earlier this year, as are hospitalization and death rates.

The arrival of vaccines has helped to paint that rosier picture, thanks to their remarkable efficacy in offering upwards of 95% protection for those vaccinated. Many thousands of doses have already been administered locally, and everyone 16 and older is now eligible to receive one.

There are plenty of reasons to celebrate, but also, there are reasons to keep such optimism in check, as there does appear to be a minor uptick in COVID prevalence in North Georgia and other parts of the country, with people being advised to maintain COVID best practices.

"We have seen a significant decline in COVID over the last few weeks, even having a day that we went almost 24 hours without a COVID inpatient," Union General Hospital Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett said at the end of last week. "That has not happened since last May.

"We have since seen a slight increase in our percentage positive COVID tests over the last week. We have also had an increase in our inpatient numbers this last week, getting as high as 11 inpatients. That number has dropped back off a little toward the end of the week.

"We currently have 6 patients in COVID isolation,

with three of those pending test results, so three confirmed positive. It looks like from their reported numbers that Northeast Georgia saw the same bump earlier in the week."

Regional increases appear to be moving from west to east across North Georgia, with recent local testing and hospital admissions seeming to follow this same pattern, Barnett said, adding that she is hopeful vaccination efforts will help minimize the impact of any new surges.

Additionally, Barnett said the hospital will continue to monitor the situation closely "so we will be aware if it looks like another surge is coming our way."

"We have tried to respond as a health system to the decline in prevalence by loosening our visitation restrictions some," Barnett said. "We are currently having scheduled visitation inside at both of our nursing homes. This has been a welcome change for our residents, their families and our staff. A large percentage of our nursing home residents have now been vaccinated."

Vaccines are now available via multiple locations, both private and public, including from the Towns County Health Department via District 2 Public Health.

"We continue to encourage people to get vaccinated, to wear masks, watch their distance and wash their hands," District 2 Public Information Office Dave Palmer said.

Currently, appointments are still required to receive vaccination through the Health Department, and Palmer said he wasn't sure when walk-ins might be allowed.

"We need to have a good gauge of how many people are

scheduled to manage waste," Palmer said.

By now, there are multiple avenues for residents to schedule vaccination appointments, including the Office of the Governor's own partnership with the Georgia Emergency Management Agency at <https://myvaccinegeorgia.com>.

People may also visit <http://phdistrict2.org> and click on "REGISTER HERE" at the top of the page to schedule an appointment at the local Health Department, or they can call 706-896-2265.

Local pharmacies like Walgreens, Ingles and Walmart are also carrying the vaccine, appointments for which can be scheduled via each company's website.

Folks may visit ngvax.com for vaccination through Synergy Health of Hiawassee, which has been vaccinating as many people as possible since the first doses arrived in the mountains. Synergy is using Moderna vaccine, so people under 18 will need to find a location giving Pfizer.

In other news, Gov. Brian Kemp signed a trio of executive orders last week, effectively extending Georgia's Public Health State of Emergency through April 30 while scaling back some of the COVID-19 restrictions that have been in place since early spring 2020.

Starting April 8 and lasting through at least April 30, there will be no more gatherings ban, no shelter-in-place requirements, no critical infrastructure distinctions, social distancing easing for restaurants, bars, movie theaters, etc., and law enforcement will no longer be able to close an organization for failure to comply with executive order provisions.

Open Meetings...from Page 1A

and how the space would be used, including floor plans for townhouses up to three bedrooms each.

The project features eight units per acre, and Ordiales said city law restricted residential building to a four units per acre density limit. Councilwoman Anne Mitchell supported changing the ordinance to bring in more development downtown such as this.

"I don't have any problems with tweaking our ordinance if that is one of the things we need to do," Mitchell said. "We did what we did for a specific reason, and it has served us well. There are other things to think about now."

Mitchell also brought up the need for low-cost housing in the community and asked Lawson if there was a consideration for dedicating a percentage of the townhouses to low-income residents.

Lawson explained that having low-income townhouses with regular priced ones may bring the value down, from his experience.

Commenters on Facebook asked about already existing townhouses in the city, and the council explained that those buildings were around \$500,000 while the proposed houses will start around \$230,000.

Before moving forward with the idea of townhouses, council members will have to discuss potential ordinance changes.

In her Mayor's Report, Ordiales updated everyone on progress at Lloyd's Landing, including the addition of orange poles that measure the depth of the lake and new picnic tables.

"We also put out the three benches that are right there on the shoreline so you

can watch your little kids play and go get them when they go into the 4 feet area," Ordiales said. "The Towns County Civic Association helped us out with that. It is a great group, and I always try as much as possible to bring in people in the community to work together."

With spring underway and summer coming up, events will be returning to the area, including the ever-popular Enchanted Music on the Square. The concert series will begin May 29, and the Friday Night Market will return May 7, both on the Hiawassee Town Square.

The public may view the March 29 meeting on the City of Hiawassee Facebook page, and also the April 6 regular meeting, which occurred after press time.