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Gift to let Rainbow Babies hospital open a pediatric brain tumor center

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Rainbow Babies & Children's Hospital will use one of its most significant gifts ever to establish a pediatric brain tumor center, aiming to make the hospital a national research leader.

The money will help expand diagnostic and treatment capabilities and, hospital officials hope, establish Cleveland as the leading national referral site for young patients.

The Jennifer Ferchill Brain Tumor Center is in memory of John and Sharon Ferchill's daughter, who died in 1982 after a 9½-month battle with the disease. Brain tumors are the leading cause of cancer death

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in children. More than 2,200 cases of pediatric brain tumors are diagnosed each year.

The center, launched Tuesday, is a partnership between Rainbow and University Hospitals' Ireland Cancer Center. It will create a virtual operating room that will simulate brain surgery, allowing young doctors to learn the latest techniques without having to open a child's head.

The operating room of the future will be equipped with intra-operative MRIs and computer-guided imaging equipment that have opened the door to more minimally invasive procedures.



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"We believe we can become the premier brain center in the country," said Dr. Alan Cohen, chief of pediatric neurosurgery at Rainbow.

The Ferchill family donated money to establish the center. The family asked University Hospitals not to disclose the amount.

But Cohen said the gift is one of the most significant in Rainbow's history.

John Ferchill is chairman of the Ferchill Group, a real estate and management firm based in Cleveland.



Jennifer Ferchill

The center should also help Rainbow's chances of joining the National Institutes of Health's Pediatric Brain Tumor Consortium, a network of medical centers that evaluate new treatments. The consortium means more Rainbow children will have access to experimental therapies for brain cancer.

The center will recruit a number of new specialists, including a neuro-oncologist, a laboratory research scientist to lead Rainbow's cell and tissue bank and a pharmacologist with expertise in developmental therapeutics.

"We are trying to promote early diagnosis and compassionate care," said Cohen.

The ultimate goal is to determine the origins of brain tumors, like the lemon-sized one that caused 10-year-old Treasure Byrge to collapse in gym class last December.

"It was very terrifying," said Treasure's mother, Carol Byrge. "She was never sick in the past. I was worrying whether she would live and what her quality of life would be."

Cohen's surgical team found the tumor wedged between the hemispheres in Treasure's brain, and it was hemorrhaging wildly. They got it all, though, and Treasure made a complete recovery.

The outcome was not so for 9-year-old Jennifer Ferchill, who died of a rare tumor that tangled around her brain stem. Surgeons could remove only part of the tumor, and radiation couldn't keep it from growing further.

"Jennifer never went back to school," said Sharon Ferchill. "She had problems with her walk. It was a very, very difficult time for all of us. You can't tell your daughter that she will feel better tomorrow."

The Ferchills kept their promise to their daughter that she wouldn't have to return to the hospital, and she died at home. The Ferchills immediately created a foundation in their daughter's name.

A few years ago, the Ferchills met Cohen and were so impressed they decided to give a gift for the center.

"We couldn't save our daughter, but maybe this will save others," Sharon Ferchill said