



Department of Otolaryngology- Head and Neck Surgery

ANNUAL
REPORT
2025

 **VCUHealth™**
VCU School of Medicine

2025 Annual Report

Message from the Chair

Empowering People, Growing Together



Laurence J DiNardo, MD, FACS

Darlene and George P. Emerson, Jr.
Professor and Chair, Department of
Otolaryngology-
Head and Neck Surgery

Dear Colleagues,

The Department of Otolaryngology - Head and Neck Surgery at Virginia Commonwealth University Health System continues to thrive. All subspecialties have experienced growth and service expansion. Additional faculty in pediatric otolaryngology, sinus and skull base surgery, as well as facial plastic and reconstructive surgery have arrived with plans for additional specialists in head and neck surgery, pediatric otolaryngology, and comprehensive otolaryngology to join the Department in the coming year. New advanced practice providers and Audiologists have also joined our ranks.

The research program has received additional departmental support that benefits faculty, residents, and interested students alike. Our research fellowship continues to attract high quality productive applicants that have enriched our research efforts. Overall, clinical trials have expanded with up to eight studies in head and neck oncology alone.

The Department remains committed to exceptional resident and medical student education. With the addition of a third resident several years ago, we have now reached a full complement of fifteen residents. Service teams have been established to provide more focused experiences and continuity of care. Our graduating residents have again secured superb fellowships and employment opportunities. For those students seeking otolaryngology - head and neck surgery exposure, a medical student rotation coordinator has been added to facilitate their experience.

Perhaps the most important attribute of the Department is its collegial, cohesive, and supportive members. These qualities have allowed us to achieve our goals and sustain us during challenging times both in academic medicine and life itself. In my mind, a finer family of coworkers does not exist.

I hope you enjoy this overview and trust you will gain additional insight and inspiration from the contents of this report.

Our Department by the Numbers



45

Faculty and Staff



17

Residents and Fellows



32.5k

Clinic Visits



4.5k

Surgeries



70+

Publications



8

H&N clinical trials

Residency Program Highlights



From Our Program Director

2025 Residency Update

We have had a very exciting year marked by great resident accomplishments and growth in our program!

- Celebrated our first year with a full complement of residents (3 per year).
- Successfully implemented our national didactic curriculum, the Otolaryngology Core Curriculum, for which I serve as an editor for the pediatric otolaryngology modules.
- Restructured our downtown rotations into four teams: 1) Head and Neck Oncology, 2) Pediatric Otolaryngology, 3) Otolaryngology/Skull Base and 4) General Otolaryngology and Facial Trauma.
- Reorganized didactic sessions into a Thursday morning block, based on resident feedback, to enhance the educational experience and empower their learning journey.

Additionally, Dr. Lee matched into a prestigious Otolaryngology Fellowship, while our other chiefs, Drs. Long and Debs, have secured positions with outstanding private practices in Virginia and California, respectively.

We are excited for the year to come and remain committed to learning, teamwork and cheering on our residents' future successes!



Kelley M Dodson, MD

Aristides Sismanis MD and
Anna Sismanis MD Professor
and Program Director,
Department of
Otolaryngology -
Head and Neck Surgery

2025-2026 Chief Residents



Dr. Sarah Debs



Dr. Lawrence Lee



Dr. Daniel Long

2025-2026 PGY-1 Residents



Dr. Leona Tu
Drexel University College of
Medicine



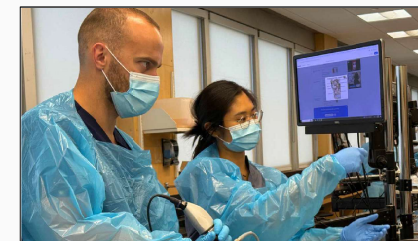
Dr. Michael Warn
University of California -
Riverside School of Medicine



Oliver "Mikki" Whittington-
Wake Forest University
School of Medicine

2025 Courses and Labs

- Allergy Course, Course Directors: Drs. Theodore Schuman and Andrew Heller
- Microvascular Course, Course Directors: Drs. Thomas Lee and Christopher Kandl
- Hayden Lecture, Course Directors: Dr. Daniel Coelho and Guest Dr. George Wanna
- Pediatric Airway Course, Course Directors: Dr. Raj Petersson and Guest Dr. Stephanie Wong
- Sinus Course, Course Director: Dr. Theodore Schuman
- Temporal Bone Lab, Course Directors: Drs. Daniel Coelho, Nauman Manzoor and Guest Dr. Angela Peng



Resident Year in Pictures - Inside the Operating Room



Residents Year in Pictures - Beyond the Operating Room



People in Motion and Team Growth



Congratulations!



Rajanya Petersson, MD, FACS, Professor was appointed to lead the newly established Academic Division of Pediatric Otolaryngology. In addition to her role as Division Chief, she directs the Ambulatory Surgical Clinics at Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU H. Her practice focuses on various pediatric otolaryngology areas, including airway reconstruction, oncology, and facial plastic surgery. Dr. Petersson has initiated several clinics, participates in the Craniofacial Care and Cochlear Implant teams, and is actively involved in professional organizations.



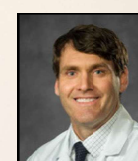
Nima Vahidi, MD, Assistant Professor earned the highest score on the American Board of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery (ABFPRS) examination. He was honored with the Jack R. Anderson Award for Scholastic Excellence at the AAFPRS Fall Meeting in New Orleans, LA. The award reflects specialty's standard of excellence via ABFPRS certification for new and existing facial plastic surgeons who provide the best surgical outcomes for their patients. After residency at VCU, Dr. Vahidi completed facial plastic and reconstructive surgery fellowship at Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse, NY.



Margaret Zwicker, ANP-BC was promoted to Lead Advanced Practice Provider (APP) for the Department overseeing all APPs. NP Zwicker has been with the Department for over 13 years. Prior to that she was operating room nurse also at VCU Health. She obtained her Bachelor of Science Psychology and MS Nursing Adult Primary Care from Virginia Commonwealth University. NP Zwicker is also currently serving as a Clinical Preceptor, Virginia Commonwealth University Master of Nursing Program.



Thomas Lee, MD, FACS has been promoted to Professor. Dr. Lee has been with VCU Health Department of Otolaryngology - Head and Neck Surgery for more than 11 years. He completed a Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery Fellowship in University of Texas Southwestern in Fort Worth, Texas after completing residency at Upstate Medical University in Syracuse.



Christopher J Kandl, MD has been promoted to Associate Professor. Dr. Kandl has been with VCU Health Department of Otolaryngology - Head and Neck Surgery for more than 7 years. He completed a fellowship in Head and Neck Oncologic and Reconstructive Surgery at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics after residency at the University of Kansas Medical Center.

Welcome New Clinicians!



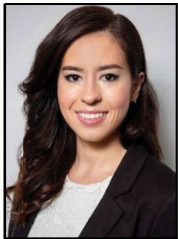
Ghedak Ansari, MD
Assistant Professor
Pediatric Otolaryngology



Nima Vahidi, MD
Assistant Professor
Facial Plastic & Reconstructive
Surgery



Michael Armstrong, MD
Assistant Professor
Rhinology and Skull Base
Surgery



Sylvia Horne, MD
Fellow, Facial Plastic &
Reconstructive Surgery



Stephanie Jeffrey, FNP
Pediatric
Otolaryngology



Abigail Klena, FNP
General and Pediatric
Otolaryngology at CMH



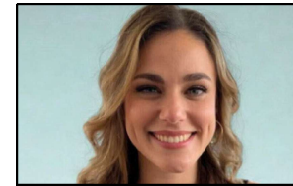
Sarah W Gills, AuD
Audiologist



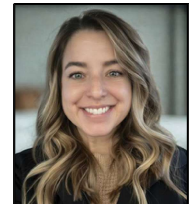
Daniel Shearer, AuD
Audiologist

Welcome New Team Members!

**Our Inaugural Associate
Administrator and our
2025-2026 Research
Fellow:**
Emily Lewis, MBA and
Aaron Tucker, BA



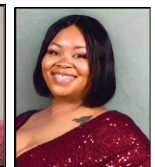
**New ENT Nurse
Coordinators supporting
subspecialties:**
Leah Cantwell (Sleep),
Robyn Reaves, RN
(Neurotology) and Rachel
Smith (Rhinology)



**Our surgery schedulers
officially joined the
department from the
clinics:**
Kristen Saunders, Kim
Haas, Corey Edwards,
Vannary Om and
Cassandra Smith Dyson



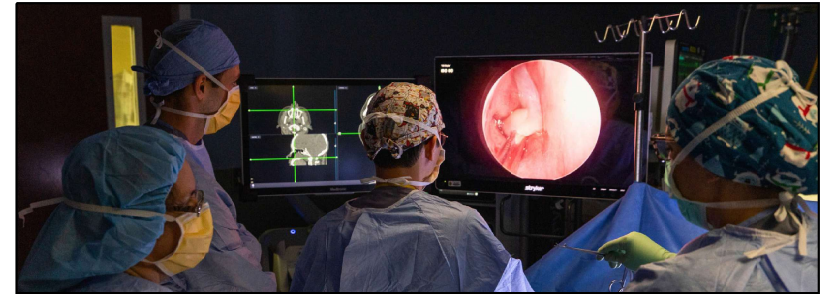
**New faces of our growing
administrative team:**
Lexi Hill, Keisha Barrett,
Jessica Hamme and
ShaRita Johnson



Clinical Excellence and Program Growth



Skull Base Program



VCU Health's Multi-Disciplinary Skull Base Program is undergoing significant expansion in 2025, marked by the arrival of new faculty and a renewed focus on collaborative clinical care. Dr. Michael Armstrong, an expert in Rhinology and Skull Base surgery, and Dr. Ryan Cleary, a neurosurgeon specializing in tumors and skull base pathology, have joined the team to enhance surgical capabilities. Under the leadership of Co-Directors Dr. Anil Roy and Dr. Theodore Schuman, the program is strengthening its multidisciplinary foundation through a new monthly Skull Base Imaging Conference, which brings together specialists from Otolaryngology - Head and Neck Surgery, Neurosurgery and Neuroradiology to review complex cases.

This growth extends into a broader initiative to unify clinical, research, and educational efforts across several departments, including Otolaryngology, Neurosurgery, Radiology, Oncology, Endocrinology, Radiation Oncology, and Ophthalmology. The program's commitment to high-level education is further demonstrated by our courses, such as the Rhinology, Orbit, and Skull Base Surgery course in October 2025, directed by Dr. Schuman.

On the international stage, the program's faculty continue to hold prominent leadership and educational roles. Dr. Schuman served as a course faculty member for the North American Skull Base Society (NASBS) 2025 and directed two international virtual courses: Virtual Rhinology in April 2025 and Rhinology Around the World in December 2025.

Additionally, the department's otologists maintain a strong presence in national leadership and expert panels, continuing VCU's long-standing history of excellence in neurotology and lateral skull base surgery. Drs. Daniel Coelho and Nauman Manzoor co-directed VCU's Annual Temporal Bone and Lateral Skull Base Surgery Course, training the next generation of surgeons. Dr. Nauman Manzoor was also involved nationally as invited faculty at the North American Skull Base Society (NASBS) and has co-authored impactful publications. He also has co-authored national curriculum related to lateral skull base tumors and treatment of skull base disorders for AAC-HNS.

Sleep Surgery



In 2025, our sleep surgery program achieved several important milestones. Under the direction of Dr. Nord, Director of Sleep Surgery, we completed our 500th Inspire hypoglossal nerve stimulation procedure. In collaboration with Dr. Petersson, we also implanted our first pediatric Inspire patient, expanding access to this therapy for children 12 years and older with obstructive sleep apnea and Down syndrome.

Dr. Nord led a cadaver lab focused on advanced barbed pharyngoplasty techniques at the International Surgical Sleep Society meeting in Indianapolis and at the Panamerican AAO-HNS meeting in Santiago, Chile. In addition, Drs. Nord and Reiter participated in a clinical trial aimed at identifying optimal targets for next-generation nerve stimulators of the ansa cervicalis nerve, with the goal of expanding the population of patients who can benefit from neurostimulator for Obstructive Sleep Apnea. Together, these efforts highlight our continued commitment to innovation, education, and improving outcomes for patients with obstructive sleep apnea.

Otology & Neurotology

The Otology & Neurotology Section is redefining the regional standard of care through a specialized, cohesive team of two fellowship-trained Neurotologists, a dedicated Nurse Practitioner, an otology Nurse Coordinator and a dedicated comprehensive cochlear implant audiology team of 14 audiologists. This integrated structure allows us to deliver a seamless continuum of care, anchored by our consistent, high-volume Hearing Implant Program. We take immense pride in our status as a regional leader in hearing rehabilitation, where close surgical-audiological collaboration drives superior patient outcomes. As a result, in calendar year 2025, hearing implant surgical volume grew by 13%.



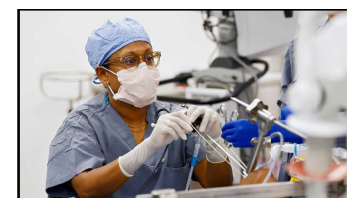
In parallel with our restorative work, we are making significant strides in expanding our Skull Base Surgery Program, increasing our capacity to manage complex lateral skull base pathologies with a focus on functional preservation.

Another unique aspect of our practice remains our high-level expertise in Endoscopic Ear Surgery (EES). As one of the select practices proficient in this minimally invasive technique, we treat chronic ear disease and cholesteatoma using high-definition, transcanal approaches that eliminate the need for external incisions. By combining this innovative surgical philosophy with our robust implant volume and expanding skull base capabilities, we are committed to providing world-class, tertiary-level expertise with a patient-centered focus.

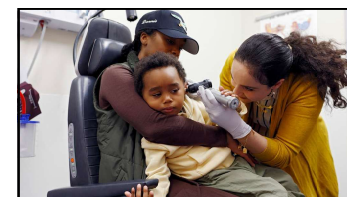
Pediatric Otolaryngology

The newly formed Division of Pediatric Otolaryngology and the Pediatric ENT service at Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU has experienced significant growth and transformation over the past two years, establishing itself as a regional leader in specialized care. The division has doubled in size, expanding from two faculty and one advanced practice provider (APP) to three faculty and three APPs, with the recruitment of a nurse practitioner and Dr. Ansari as the third faculty member. Dr. Ebone Bady will join as the fourth faculty in 2026, further strengthening the team. Patient volumes have increased substantially, and surgical volume in calendar year 2025 was 17% higher than in 2024.

New operating rooms at the Children's Hospital Brook Road campus will open this summer to support rising surgical volumes, while our presence in the West End continues to expand through a new clinic at Short Pump Pavilion and increased participation in multidisciplinary care.



Multi-disciplinary care and program development remains a key focus for our Division. At the Center for Craniofacial Care, Dr. Bady will collaborate with Dr. Petersson to advance cleft, craniofacial, and vascular anomalies programs, with an emphasis on expanding international outreach. The Aerodigestive Program, a unique multidisciplinary clinic addressing complex conditions not offered elsewhere in the Greater Richmond area, continues to grow and refocus its strategic direction, research priorities, and future growth. Additionally, we will enhance airway and critical care programs, aligning with resident education and meeting the increasing complexity of cases in the NICU and PICU.



With new facilities, expanded programs, and a growing team, the Pediatric Otolaryngology Division is well-positioned to meet rising clinical demands in the region and advance our research and education initiatives.



Facial Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery



The Facial Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery Section, within the Department of Otolaryngology–Head & Neck Surgery, provides advanced reconstructive and cosmetic facial surgery with a focus on complex, tertiary-level referral care. The section plays a critical institutional role through high-acuity head and neck free flap reconstruction, maintaining a sustained success rate exceeding 99% for patients with ballistic and high-energy facial trauma, advanced oncologic defects, and open skull base pathology. These services directly support and strengthen the Head and Neck Surgical Oncology, Facial Trauma, and Skull Base Surgery programs.

In collaboration with Dr. Kandl and the Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery team, the section established a comprehensive “Jaw in a Day” reconstruction program for both mandibular and maxillary defects, positioning VCU among a small number of centers nationally offering these procedures at relatively high volume. The program uniquely incorporates KLS pre-prosthetic implant placement in select patients, enabling functional dentition in cases previously considered unreconstructible and significantly improving nutrition, speech, and facial cosmesis.

The section also provides advanced facial nerve reconstruction and reanimation for paralysis related to stroke, skull base pathology, and traumatic nerve injury—services that remain uncommon at many academic centers. A full spectrum of facial aesthetic surgery, including complex revision rhinoplasty, and advanced Mohs reconstruction for challenging facial oncologic defects is offered. Care is delivered through a multidisciplinary model and is supported by a strong educational mission. The section is staffed by Drs. Thomas S. Lee and Nima Vahidi, with Dr. Michael Godin serving as Adjunct Faculty and Fellowship Director for the Facial Plastic Surgery Fellowship Program.

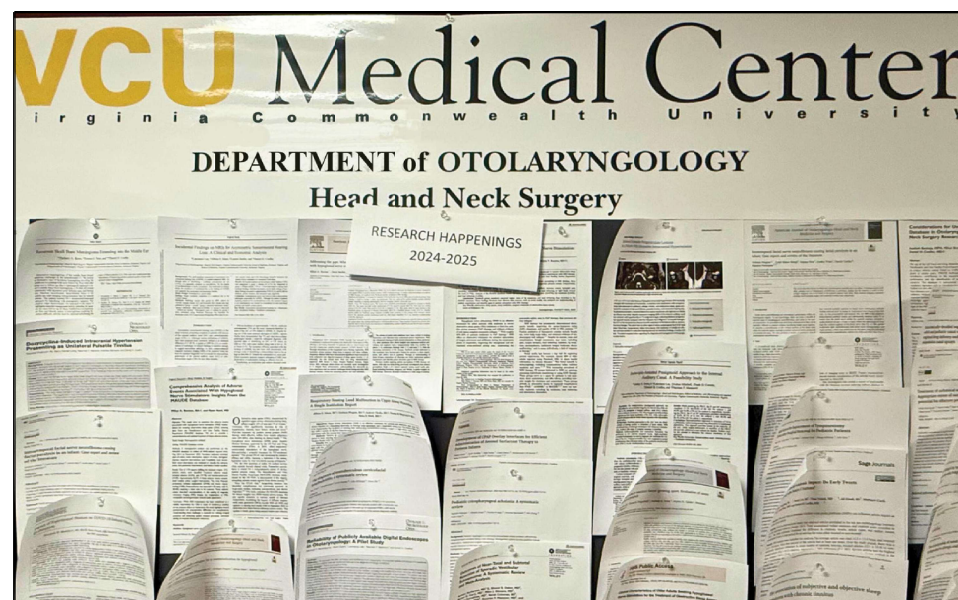
Head & Neck Surgery

The Section of Head and Neck Cancer Surgery continues to thrive in the VCU Massey Comprehensive Cancer Center. Our providers remain actively engaged in the multidisciplinary tumor board and collaborate closely with medical oncology, radiation oncology, radiology, and oral and maxillofacial surgery to deliver comprehensive, patient-centered care. Also, they participate in multiple clinical trials and work on research projects to advance translational and basic science.

Looking ahead, we are excited to welcome Dr. Cheryl Yu to the faculty in September of 2026. Dr. Yu is a graduate of the Department of Otolaryngology–Head and Neck Surgery residency program and is currently completing a fellowship in Head and Neck Oncologic Surgery and Microvascular Reconstruction at Baylor College of Medicine. We also plan to expand our team with an additional Head and Neck Advanced Practice Provider (APP), further strengthening our commitment to excellence in clinical care and innovation.



Collaboration, Research, Community Impact



Research Update

Over the past year, the Department of Otolaryngology has demonstrated notable growth in both research and quality improvement (QI) initiatives. Faculty and trainee projects focused on basic and translational science and were presented locally, nationally, and internationally at meetings including COSM, Triologic Society, American Academy of Otolaryngology – Head & Neck Surgery, and the Virginia Society of Otolaryngology. Several presentations have also received awards. Publication productivity has been strong, with over 40 peer-reviewed papers accepted for publication by indexed journals within the last 12 months. Our faculty and residents' research has also been featured in the lay press, particularly work on Covid-related anosmia and the development of an olfactory implant to treat anosmia. Quality improvement has been equally emphasized, with resident-driven projects targeting perioperative safety, efficiency, and patient-centered care. Weekly Grand Rounds integrate research updates with QI discussions, reinforcing a culture of continuous improvement.



Daniel H. Coelho, MD, FACS
G. Douglas Hayden
Professor and Vice
Chair, Research

ENT Welcomes Exchange Scholar

Dr. Mukadas Umarova, a board-certified otorhinolaryngologist from Astana, Kazakhstan, joined us recently as the inaugural participant in a new to ENT rotation as part of the VCU-Bolashak International Scholarship Program. With over 20 years of clinical experience and advanced training from international institutions, Dr. Umarova's six-month clinical observership at VCU included rotations at the Children's Pavilion, the 9109 Stony Point Surgery Center, and the Adult Outpatient Pavilion under the mentorship of Dr. Petersson. She also participated in grand rounds and various educational activities, sharing her extensive experience with the department.

The VCU-Bolashak International Scholarship Program is a Kazakhstan government-funded initiative designed to build national healthcare capacity. VCU has hosted these scholars for clinical and research training since the program began in 2012. The Department of Otolaryngology - Head and Neck Surgery will continue to partner with the program and host additional participants. We are looking forward to hosting Dr. Ainash Khisamitova in January 2026.



Audiology's Camp CHAT

Hosted by Audiology at VCU Health, camp C.H.A.T. (Children Hearing and Talking) is an annual event that supports children who are Deaf or hard of hearing by fostering auditory development, social interaction, and verbal communication through a fun and engaging cooperative learning environment.

We had a wonderful turnout this summer, with 28 registered campers. Campers ranged in age from 3 to 11 years old and were divided into four different groups based on age and developmental level. Each group was led by a Speech-Language Pathologist, Teacher of the Deaf, or former Early Childhood educator.

Camp is planned around a theme each year, with past themes including sports, transportation, and outer space. This year's theme was "The Amazing Race", and the children learned about a different country each day. We even had some special guests, including a sushi chef for Japan day, a henna artist for Egypt day, and a didgeridoo player for Australia day.

Camp is such a special experience for our patients, many of whom are the only children with hearing loss at their schools. This is one time of year when they get to be around other children just like them. This camp is a true community effort, made possible by generous grant funding from the VCU Health's Medical Center Auxiliary grant program and the dedication of over 20 volunteers—many of whom are former campers returning to give back.

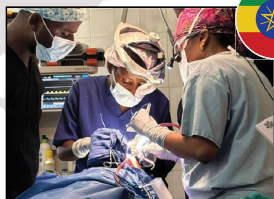


VCU ENT Around the World

Otologist Dr. Daniel Coelho, and Audiologist Sean Kastetter and Sarah Gills participated in the VCU-led "Health Hearing Program" in **Barbados**, in partnership with the Sandy Lane Charitable Trust. The Program is celebrating its tenth year and in 2025, the team completed two mission trips and offered remote services to children with hearing loss. They fitted numerous children with hearing aids and performed three cochlear implant surgeries, allowing local access to care and avoiding travel and costs to the U.S.



In July 2025, a surgical team led by Dr. Thomas S. Lee traveled to **Almaty, Kazakhstan**, to work with City Clinical Hospital № 5, focusing on otolaryngology and oral maxillofacial surgery. They conducted around 50 consultations with local doctors and educated approximately 80 physicians on advanced surgical techniques from the USA. The team performed 8 successful surgeries, including revision cleft surgeries for children and complex cases in adults, such as eyelid contractures, facial fractures, neurofibromatosis, and severe burns. The mission, supported by KCBANA donors, significantly improved access to specialized medical care in Kazakhstan.



Dr. Ghedak Ansari participated in a medical mission trip to **Karbala, Iraq**, sponsored by the Imam AH-Hujjah Charitable Hospital and the Development and Relief Foundation, a public-benefit NGO. The trip included collaboration with local physicians through hospital tours, lectures on advanced techniques commonly used in the United States, and patient consultations arranged by the host institutions. Additionally, the team shadowed local physicians to foster professional relationships and explore opportunities for future partnerships with VCU, focusing on resident and professional learning initiatives.

Dr. Rajanya S. Petersson, MD, MS, FACS, joined a cleft mission trip to Ethiopia, where the team completed seven life-changing surgeries at Felege Hiwot Hospital in **Bahir Dar, Ethiopia**. These missions not only deliver critical care for children with orofacial clefting but also advance sustainable impact by training and empowering local providers. During this trip, Dr. Petersson worked alongside Ethiopian fellow Kassaw Ketemaw, who performed surgeries independently, reflecting the success of ongoing skills transfer. The collaboration extended beyond the operating room, with volunteers and families connecting through play and dedicated nurses from Liberia providing essential post-operative care. This effort underscores our commitment to education, partnership, and creating lasting change in global health.

Dr. Ryan S. Nord, Director of Sleep Surgery, represented ENT and our institution at the Panamerican Association of Oto-Rhino-Laryngology meeting in **Santiago, Chile**. A primary highlight of his visit was leading an intensive cadaver lab session, where he provided clinical guidance on advanced barbed pharyngoplasty techniques. This surgical approach is a critical component in the modern treatment of obstructive sleep apnea, and Dr. Nord's mentorship offered international colleagues a unique opportunity to refine their technical skills under the direction of a leading expert in sleep surgery.

Empowering People, Growing Together



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