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Fellowship-trained pediatric neurosurgeon provides caring expertise to child and parent

When Nehemiah McConnell was nine years old, he began having seizures. His treatment began with prescribed medication, but unfortunately, the seizures continued. An MRI in April 2013 showed something no parent is ever prepared to hear—he had a brain tumor. Nehemiah was immediately referred to John Gachiani, M.D., central Iowa’s first fellowship-trained pediatric neurosurgeon, at Mercy Neurosurgery.

“It all happened very fast,” says Gabrielle McConnell, Nehemiah’s mother. “Nehemiah had the MRI on a Wednesday, we met Dr. Gachiani on a Friday and he had surgery the following Monday at Mercy.”

“As a parent, when you have a child who has to have this procedure done, there is a lot that goes through your head. I was very nervous. It lasted six hours—a very long six hours. But through it all, everyone did a really good job of keeping us informed. I got through it with a lot of prayer.”

The pathology results revealed a dysembryoplastic neuroepithelial tumor, sometimes called DNET. It is a low-grade tumor that is typically cured with surgery, but can recur. Because of the tumor’s size and placement, Nehemiah had a second surgery to remove the remaining tumor. When another growth appeared in December 2015, he had a third surgery.

Dr. Gachiani performed all three surgeries and continues to treat Nehemiah with follow-up scans and medication for continuing seizures. Gabrielle describes him as a good communicator who is also caring and very personable.

“He’s been so helpful about working with us, and getting us in for an appointment if Nehemiah has a problem,” she says. “He was never in a rush to get us out of the hospital after surgery—he took his cues from how Nehemiah was feeling. He always asks Nehemiah about his grades and how he’s keeping up in school, and he’ll encourage him and tell him how important it is.”

“Nehemiah had such great care from everyone at Mercy. With three surgeries, we got to know the entire care team very well. I really liked all of his nurses and child life specialists, and he got to see some of them again when he was invited back to help with a mural at the hospital!”