

# Surgeon inspired by doctor who saved his life

**Tim Walters**

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## Q: Why did you go into the medical field?

A: When I was 7 years old, I became sick with pyelonephritis. A Dr. Roca took care of me and essentially saved my life. He would come to my house on a routine basis for three months. Eventually when I recovered, I said “I want to be a Doctor to help people.”

## Q: What medical services do you provide?

A: I am a general surgeon with training in advanced laparoscopy and robotic surgery. I specialize in weight loss surgery, reflux disease, all general surgery procedures including colorectal cancer, gallbladder, hernias and breast cancer.

Elective procedures we perform, for the most part, are laparoscopic and minimally invasive. This means we operate through small tiny incisions for the advantage of faster recovery, less pain, decreased complications with improved outcomes. From the weight-loss perspective, we provide everything from medical weight-loss, supervision, including nutrition evaluation, managing post-surgery follow-up and weight-loss monitoring for bariatric surgery.

## Q: What makes this area of health/medical/medicine fulfilling for you?

A: What makes my job so fulfilling is when my patients are happy and make



**Dr. Diego Velarde is a general surgeon with training in advanced laparoscopy and robotic surgery with offices in Rockledge/Viera and Melbourne.**

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statements like, “Dr. Velarde, thank you very much. You changed my life.” Or, when they tell me “I’m not taking medications anymore. I am off my insulin and blood pressure medication.” Or, “I’m able to go on the rides in Orlando with my kids or grandkids since I’ve lost so much weight.” Giving people their lives back and making them happy, makes me happy.

## Q: When did you realize this was the right medically-related career path?

A: When I was in first-year medical

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school, a surgeon called me and said, “Diego I am going to do a cancer surgery and I need your help.”

This was the first time I had ever seen a surgery which took four hours retracting a liver. Initially, I almost fainted, but obviously couldn’t state that after seeing what the surgeon did and how he essentially saved this person’s life. At that point I said, “I’m going to be a surgeon.”

During my residency, I always found laparoscopy and minimally invasive surgical procedures fascinating. The patients would recover so much faster than traditional surgery.

## Q: What’s the latest advancement in your field that will benefit your patients?

A: There’s advancement in surgery

probably every day but I would say one of the most recent, most technologically advanced is robotic surgery. This is still laparoscopic/minimally invasive surgery; but while using the robot you have the advantage of a 3D camera with incredible visualization of the structures and tissues as well as the dexterity of unparalleled proportions for better suturing.

## Q: Best advice for current and potential patients?

A: The best advice I can give a patient is to always do your research. Always ask questions and do not hesitate to have a second opinion.

## Q: How long have you practiced your area of expertise? In Brevard County?

A: I graduated from my fellowship in 2006. I have been in Brevard County since 2008. I have been practicing medicine for 14 years.

## Q: Anything additional information you would like to add?

A: It’s important to note for potential bariatric surgery/weight loss surgery patients, most insurances cover bariatric surgery, with some exclusions. This includes commercial insurances, Medicare, HMO’s, Medicaid and so on. It’s important to review your policy options, talk to your primary care or call our office directly.

*Have a suggestion for FLORIDA TODAY’s Know Your Health Pro feature? Contact Tim Walters at [twalters@floridatoday.com](mailto:twalters@floridatoday.com)*

# These methods can help detect cancer early



**Dr. Sue Mitra**

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Cancer is the second leading cause of death in the United States after heart disease.

Over a lifetime, about one of every three Americans will develop some form of malignancy.

April is National Cancer Control Month. Screenings can help detect cancer early to improve prognosis.

Being overweight, physical inactivity, tobacco users, excess alcohol consumption and poor nutrition, regular exposure to carcinogens (cancer-causing agents) in occupation, or prolonged unprotected exposure to sunlight are all at increased risk for certain cancers.

Scientific and medical discoveries have a significant impact on controlling cancer.

Genetic testing researchers have found mutations in genes may cause cancer.

Patients with a family history of cancer should talk to their primary care

physician for a referral to a cancer genetics specialist.

Genetic counseling helps patients decide if testing is right for them as well as understand and deal with the results.

They can request blood tests, which may show if you have inherited any of these genetic changes.

Vaccines, on the other hand, help the immune system to prevent or fight disease.

Cancer vaccines and chemopreventive agents can prevent certain cancers.

New and more accurate cancer screening methods allow earlier detection of some precancerous lesions and early-stage cancers. This helps physicians treat people before the disease progresses.

While waiting for new breakthroughs, take action to prevent cancer at every step of your life.

Screening tests help detect malignancies in their earliest stages, but you should always be alert for symptoms.

Bring to your doctor’s attention if you have any of the following symptoms: change in bladder or bowel habits; a sore that will not heal; an unusual lump in the breast or elsewhere; difficulty in

swallowing or indigestion; change in a wart or mole; nagging cough or hoarseness; unexplained weight loss or fatigue.

Listen to your body and report the symptoms to your doctor immediately.

Early diagnosis is important, but can you reduce your risk of getting cancer in the first place?

My recommendations are as follows:

- Avoid tobacco in all its forms, even exposure to secondhand smoke. If you are a heavy smoker and between the ages of 55 to 80 who has smoked within the past 15 years and who had a 30-pack-per-year smoking history, please ask your doctor for a low-dose computed tomography to detect early signs of lung cancer.

- Reduce consumption of saturated fat and red meat as it may increase the risk of colon cancer; increase your consumption of fruits, cruciferous vegetables and whole grains and fish, increase physical activity, which reduces the risk of colon cancer.

- Exercise also reduces a woman’s risk of breast and possibly reproductive cancers.

- Limit yourself to an average of one

alcoholic drink a day. Excess consumption of alcohol increases the risk of cancers of the oropharynx, larynx, esophagus, colon and liver; it also increases the risk of breast cancer in women.

- Try to protect yourself from ultraviolet radiation in sunlight, which increases the risk of melanomas and other skin cancers. Perform skin self-exams and report any unusual spots on their skin to your doctor’s attention.

- Prevent infections that contribute to cancer, such as HIV and human papillomavirus and hepatitis viruses. Many are transmitted sexually or through contaminated needles.

- Get vaccinated (the human papillomavirus vaccine helps prevent most cervical cancers and several other kinds of cancer. The hepatitis B vaccine can help lower the risk of liver cancer).

- Get regular screening tests to detect breast, cervical, and colorectal cancers early when treatment is likely to have the best outcome.

*Dr. Sue Mitra is accepting new patients and can be reached at 321-622-6222 or [info@suemitra.com](mailto:info@suemitra.com). Call now to assess your cancer risk, and review which tests may help save your life.*

# Ulrich

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First, parents can be thankful data coming in from around the world consistently indicates children are less likely to have the severity of the disease as adults.

Nearly 5% of children with COVID-19 (compared to 17% of adults) develop shortness of breath or low oxygen levels and only 0.6% (compared to 5% of adults) progress to become critically ill.

There are several postulated reasons for the milder course in children.

First, the disease tends to be more commonly an upper airway infection in children, possibly because children have fewer of the ACE2 receptors in their lungs (the virus seems to grab onto the ACE2 receptors to enter the body).

Also, as we grow older, we tend to develop more senescent cells; these cells which are alive, don’t multiply.

There is evidence that COVID-19 replicates very rapidly in these senescent cells, and since children have fewer of them, they do not get as high of a viral burden.

Further, children are frequently exposed to all types of viruses, including common coronaviruses that come through every year so it’s possible they have cross-protection.

Additional speculation references that certain childhood vaccines may also help protect against COVID-19.

In addition, the initial immune response in children may be stronger than in adults; this type of immune response in the elderly opens for them to attain a higher viral load, so the immune response may become more exaggerated in an attempt to “catch up,” so there’s more inflammation and damage to the organs.

Another important fact about COVID-19 in children is there are certain groups who are at higher risk for more severe disease.

Like other viruses, COVID 19 is more likely to cause severe viral pneumonia in preschoolers, especially the very young; though the rate of those with acute respiratory distress syndrome is still less than in the elderly.

Children with underlying medical conditions like asthma, heart disease, cancer, obesity, diabetes, Trisomy 21 and other problems that may increase inflammation or weaken the immune system may also be at risk for worse infection.

Interestingly, there is also data showing children who test positive for coronaviruses also test positive for other viruses two-thirds of the time.

It may be that children have worse disease when they are fighting two significant viral diseases at once (such as RSV or Influenza plus COVID19).

Currently, there are not enough tests for COVID 19 available, though most children would not meet the criteria for testing.

Plus, it is likely children may have the virus and be asymptomatic much of the time.

Additional evidence states children may spread the virus via nasal droplets or feces for several weeks after initially contracting.

In addition, it’s important to protect your children from diseases in which we do have vaccines to prevent; many of which have a higher mortality rate for children than COVID-19.

The psychological impact COVID19 is having upon most of our children shouldn’t be underestimated.

While there are a few children who are just glad to be home from school, the majority are stressed by this pandemic. Several factors come into play: online

school is a huge adjustment for parents and children alike; the day-to-day routine is suddenly disrupted; parents are stressed about their jobs (or lack thereof); children subsequently worry about the safety of the adults and are concerned about the stories they see on the news about deaths from COVID-19; boredom is at an all-time high; grocery stores are lacking many items, thus, this virus seems like a powerful unseen enemy trying to enter our homes with officials struggling to find answers as to how to protect us.

Children may not say they are scared or worried, though many children have trouble sleeping when they are stressed. Some will be more irritable or angry. Others may cling and demand more parental attention.

Stress often causes headaches, fatigue and stomachaches in children.

Sadly, the time of stress we are experiencing now as a culture correlates with an increase in child abuse (verbal, physical, sexual).

It is critical that stressed parents and grandparents attain help for themselves for the sake of their children.

Families can support their children, emotionally, from the impact of COVID19 through several means.

First, be positive. Smile.

Find things to be thankful for. A positive attitude is good for the immune system for young and old alike.

Play games together.

As a parent, practice the power of positive speech.

Make hand washing, mask wearing, and social distancing creative in positive ways to protect yourself as well as others.

When going out for an essential activity, have your kids help you remember to estimate how far 6 feet from others is, for the purpose of social distancing, and research together the best type

of face covering for your family.

Have your children check to be sure you are washing your hands properly.

Take walks or bike rides together or come up with healthy meal ideas together.

Try to set up new routines that are pretty much the same each day.

It is best to make a weekday routine somewhat like the pre-pandemic routine.

For example, children and teens will feel better if they have a consistent bedtime, wake time, school time, meal-times, and exercise times.

Discuss positive stories you see in the news as it pertains to COVID-19.

For example, pollution is decreasing all over the world, fish are returning to previously polluted waters, the rate of other viral illnesses are dropping as we are all being more careful and there is evidence researchers are finding answers which may help those who are sick fighting the virus.

Finally, parents can help their children by helping others.

Call to check on elderly neighbors, family and friends. Just a phone call can help with the loneliness the elderly may be experiencing at this time.

Don’t buy more than you need at the store; teach your kids to leave items for others.

If a child is sick, keep them in.

Remember, it’s important to create positives from the negatives in life, this is an unfortunately a negative we are all experiencing, so lead by example, make the best of staying at home with your children and family and remind each other what’s really important.

*Dr. Ulrich joined Pediatrics in Brevard in 1991. She also is the medical director for Aveanna Prescribed Pediatric Extended Care facility in Melbourne as well as the medical director for Brevard Early Steps.*