

Look Homeward, Doctor

Dr. Cristina Harnsberger Returns to Her Hometown as Sansum Clinic's New Colorectal Surgeon

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Colorectal Surgeon Dr. Cristina Harnsberger pictured with Andrea Hodosy, Registered Nurse Specialist

In 2002, a San Marcos High School student took a few moments away from her duties as a volunteer orderly at Cottage Hospital to peek through a window and get a sense of what goes on in an operating room during surgery. Those early experiences in healthcare set Cristina Harnsberger, MD, on a path that would include 16 years of medical training and education and take her far from her beloved hometown of Santa Barbara and back again.

In 2018, Dr. Harnsberger was completing her fellowship in colon and rectal surgery at University of Massachusetts Medical School when she heard about a career opportunity that would bring her full-circle. Greg Greaney, MD, a Sansum Clinic colorectal surgeon for 30 years, was retiring.

“My husband and I had always wanted to return to the West Coast because it’s home, and our families are in Southern California and in Santa Barbara,” Dr. Harnsberger says. “When I heard that Dr. Greaney had announced his retirement and that Sansum Clinic was searching for a surgeon to replace him, I jumped at the opportunity. It was beyond my wildest dreams that I would ever get to come back and help serve the community that has given so much to me.”

Her new position at Sansum Clinic began in July 2019. Dr. Greaney graciously decided to stay for a few months to help her transition into practice. “Dr. Greaney has been wonderful,” Dr. Harnsberger says. “He is helping ensure that the transition goes smoothly for everyone, including patients he has cared for over

a number of years so there are no gaps in patients' care. He is a fantastic surgeon. I have very big shoes to fill."

Top Training in the Latest Surgical Techniques

Both of Dr. Harnsberger's parents majored in biology at University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) and her mother taught biology to junior high school students at Laguna Blanca School in Santa Barbara. Inspired by her parents' studies, she majored in molecular and cell biology at University of California Berkeley. Summers home from college provided an opportunity to work with mentors in Santa Barbara. She shadowed her primary care physician and another internist in the community.

Guidance from those doctors stimulated her interest in a career in medicine and motivated her to seek the best possible education and training. She attended University of California Irvine (UCI) for medical school and then University of California San Diego (UCSD) for residency where she developed a love for general surgery. Mentors at UCSD inspired her to go into colorectal surgery, leading her to the colorectal surgery training program at the University of Massachusetts.

Her UCSD residency included two years of research with the minimally invasive surgery division. "I was fortunate to have excellent teachers," she says. "The people I worked with in residency and fellowship are leading the way in minimally invasive surgical procedures and innovative approaches to colorectal surgery."

Advances in bioengineering are helping this field evolve with the development of new devices and techniques that allow doctors to make smaller incisions during surgery, leading to a quicker recovery time and less pain post-surgery for patients who are candidates for these techniques. Among these are laparoscopic surgery and robotic surgery. Dr. Harnsberger shares insight on robotic surgery. "The device is called the robot, but it is controlled 100 percent by the surgeon and does not move independent of the surgeon," she explains. "Engineers have been able to make these instruments and cameras very small so surgeons don't need to cut as much tissue. But I would like to emphasize to patients that the outcome of their surgery is likely no different whether doctors use the robot, laparoscopic techniques, or go through the traditional open incision. The difference is recovery time. New techniques typically enable patients to return to their normal lives more quickly."

Big City Care in a Small Community

Today Dr. Harnsberger is double board-certified in general surgery and colorectal surgery. She treats a wide range of conditions. One of the most common is colorectal cancer, which can be prevented in many cases if detected early. National guidelines recommend that everyone over the age of

45-50 should get a colonoscopy, sooner in some cases. A primary care physician can help patients determine the best time to get their first colonoscopy.

Another common issue among Dr. Harnsberger's patients is diverticulitis, which she says is more common than colon cancer among the patients in her care. Diverticulitis occurs when pouches in the wall of the colon become infected or inflamed. Symptoms can be non-specific and include lower abdominal pain, nausea, and low appetite. "We don't know what triggers an attack of diverticulitis, so it is difficult to prevent," she says. "But a high fiber diet is helpful." In most cases, diverticulitis does not need to be treated with surgery. It can be treated with antibiotics and medically supervised fasting. Dr. Harnsberger also treats a variety of conditions including inflammatory bowel disease, which is a spectrum of disease that includes Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. And she treats colon polyps that are too large to be removed by the gastroenterologist during a colonoscopy. Many of these surgeries can be performed with minimally invasive techniques.

"In-hospital recovery time for one of these abdominal surgeries can be anywhere from three to five days," she explains. "We're also speeding recovery time by giving patients regular food the day after surgery. Research supports the safety of this approach. A couple decades ago, patients would have a tube in their nose helping drain out the stomach after surgery and would be very gradually started on liquids."

Although Santa Barbara is a relatively small city, patients who undergo these procedures at Sansum Clinic receive world-class care. "The resources that we have in Santa Barbara are very extensive in relation to the size of our community," Dr. Harnsberger says. "Thanks to the generosity of donors in the area, we have the ability to provide the level of top-notch care that would be delivered at major academic medical centers. The contributions from these donors allow us to attract excellent physicians, resources, and personnel. So we can provide exceptional care for patients with complex cases who might otherwise be diverted to Los Angeles or the Bay Area."

Dr. Harnsberger sees her new position at Sansum Clinic as a chance to return a favor for the community that has been extremely kind to her. "I was given a scholarship for medical school by an anonymous local donor through the BP Foundation and through the Santa Barbara Scholarship Foundation," she reveals. "I had my entire medical school tuition paid for. As a result, I came out of training with almost no debt. The privilege to give back to this community is wonderful. I'm thankful to Sansum Clinic for the opportunity to help anyone in the Santa Barbara area who requires my expertise." 🌻

To schedule an appointment with the Colon & Rectal Surgery Department, please call (805) 681-7500.