



BASSETT HEALTHCARE

Health Column: June 2006

Increased Cancer Survival Rates Create Need for New Focus

Every June, people throughout the United States and Canada celebrate Cancer Survivors Day. This special event honors cancer survivors, their families and their caretakers as well as those undergoing cancer treatments now. According to the American Cancer Society, there are approximately 10 million Americans living with a history of cancer. Survival rates, now at 64 percent, are increasing annually. As this number grows, the medical field is recognizing a need to expand its focus to include the period after cancer treatment—survivorship.

Cancer is a frightening diagnosis. It is known that the best treatment integrates a multidisciplinary care team with a personalized treatment plan. This approach provides patients with a range of treatment options which then needs to be complemented by a caring staff of providers and the latest technology. At teaching and research facilities patients have access to the latest clinical studies, including new drugs and innovative combinations of therapy that may not be available at community hospitals or local health clinics. The trauma of a cancer diagnosis and the stress of treatment can be lessened by participation in support groups for patients and their family members, as well as by psychological and spiritual support.

As cancer survivorship rates increase, it has become evident that it is equally important to develop a systematic post-treatment plan to address the lifelong impacts of living with a cancer diagnosis. According to the National Cancer Survivors Day Foundation, the physical, emotional, and financial hardships of surviving cancer often persist for years after diagnosis and treatment.

A recent report issued by the Institute of Medicine, recommends that upon discharge each patient needs a personalized “Survivorship Care Plan” summarizing the treatment received and incorporating patient-specific information to improve health and quality of life. Such a plan is intended to reassure survivors by helping them form realistic expectations of life after treatment and understand how they can maintain their health.

The plan should identify ongoing health care needs, recommendations for cancer screenings and periodic testing; and possible long-term effects of treatment. It should address the potential psychological and emotional impacts of cancer on relationships, parenting, work and social life. A “Survivorship Care Plan” should provide guidance to enable the patient adopt healthy behaviors to avoid future illness or secondary cancers

and when necessary it should offer recommendations about informing first-degree relatives of increased cancer risks due to family genetics.

In all likelihood, the oncology team will be the author of a “Survivorship Care Plan” however the follow-up and much of the implementation of an individual’s plan will be carried out by a primary care provider. Conceptually, the plan should provide a road map for collaboration between the patient’s cancer specialists and his or her primary physician.

Along with creating national awareness that survivorship is a major component of cancer care, the Institute of Medicine recommends new initiatives urging lawmakers and insurers to eliminate discrimination and minimize the adverse effects of cancer. They call on policy makers to ensure that cancer patients and survivors have affordable access to necessary care and consideration is being given to reimbursing physicians for completing and documenting patient specific care plans that cover the time during treatment as well as the post-treatment period.

Across the county, cancer care programs are responding to the recommendations offered by the Institute of Medicine. For patients, this expansion of services to encompass post-treatment issues brings new meaning to the concept of comprehensive cancer care.

Clif Buell is the Administrative Director of the Bassett Healthcare Regional Cancer Program.