

## **An extra set of eyes**

*Patient navigators not only help with care but make sure life-saving appointments aren't missed*

Busy days are the norm for Jill Pruitt.

The licensed practical nurse and certified oncology navigator at OSF HealthCare pores over imaging results looking for findings not related to what brought the person there in the first place. Imaging for possible lung cancer may reveal a thyroid problem and a need for a follow up appointment. She notes the appointment in her tickler file and contacts the provider later if it's not getting scheduled.

A little firmness goes a long way in catching something that could have serious consequences.

"It's important because if you just catch one thing, maybe that saves their life," Pruitt says.

"It's patient-first. I look out for all of them," she adds.

Pruitt's above-and-beyond efforts – unique throughout the entire OSF Ministry – shine a light on patient navigators and their importance.

## **What navigators do**

Pruitt says a patient navigator is usually there with someone when they're diagnosed and through their whole journey. The navigator sits in on consult appointments, helps schedule other appointments, answers questions and more.

"Basically they are the person's go-to," Pruitt repeats.

"Often when a person comes in and hears the word 'cancer,' they shut down," Pruitt explains. "They didn't hear about follow-up appointments, biopsies and other scans."

That's where a navigator comes in with a reminder. Where to go. What specialist to see. Write it down. Sometimes people just want to talk, and Pruitt obliges – day or night.

Once a person starts treatment, a nurse may become their main point of contact. But Pruitt and other navigators may still check in.

"They're always there in my heart," Pruitt says with a smile.

## **Looking closer**

Pruitt says 50 to 60 imaging reports cross her desk each week. On a spreadsheet, she tracks person by person if anything else needs done. The doctor may have recommended another appointment or test. New patients or people who came through the emergency department may need to be established with a provider.

"We're all human. Sometimes things are missed," Pruitt says. "So if I look at the chart and see the procedure is not scheduled, I contact the physician to make sure they put the order in."

Pruitt makes longer term checks, too.

“A patient comes in in April of 2023 and has a low-dose CT scan,” for example, she says. “Sometimes they need to come back in three, six or 12 months. That all is put into my tickler file for the next year. I go through the file monthly and check if they had the follow-up done. If not, I contact the physician again and make sure that test gets done.”

The doctors are usually grateful for the nudge, Pruitt says.

Pruitt may also notice people are no-showing or canceling the follow-up appointments. Or some people will explain that their insurance won't cover a follow-up so soon, so they'll just wait until their next regular visit in six months.

Not a good idea, Pruitt says. Early detection of cancer or any other ailment is key.

“Sometimes the cancer is in such an early stage. Doctors can do surgery and take it out. And then the person doesn't need treatment,” like chemotherapy or radiation, Pruitt says. It underscores the importance of sticking to your appointments and asking your care team questions.

### **Learn more**

Talk to your health care provider if you think a navigator would help your journey.