

Script – Print – Navigating the Cancer Journey

Oncology Nurse Navigators Lend Patients a Helping Hand

In February, 2020, Bonnie Hogle discovered a lump in her right breast. It was the start of a whirlwind for Bonnie, who was not only diagnosed with breast cancer, but soon after had to deal with a painful kidney stone. Not to mention, she was facing cancer surgery and treatment during the COVID pandemic. She was overcome with stress, anxiety and a cascade of medical appointments and treatments. Fortunately, she had the support of family and friends, along with an oncology nurse navigator from OSF HealthCare.

“Lisa could be there for me,” said Bonnie Hogle, cancer survivor. “She came and talked to me or talked to me on the phone quite frequently and answered any and all questions. She was able to coordinate so many appointments and things for me during that time so that I didn’t have the stress of all that on top of trying to figure out what was happening to me.”

The idea of navigating patients was first introduced in New York as a way to assist women with breast cancer. Since then, the role of navigators now includes all types of cancer care from prevention to survivorship. Nurse navigators have clinical degrees and serve as advocates for patients who must navigate the choppy waters that are often associated with a cancer journey.

“An oncology nurse navigator is a nurse with a good knowledge base about all cancer types,” said Peggy Malone, oncology nurse navigator, OSF HealthCare. “That nurse reaches out to a patient when they are first diagnosed and helps them through the odyssey that is health care, especially in the beginning when a patient is first diagnosed. They don’t know about stages, they don’t know what other testing needs to be done, treatments and just what to expect generally for the future for their treatments.”

The oncology nurse navigator focuses on the whole person and not just the disease. The navigator typically sits in on the patient’s first visit with the oncologist. As the patient is learning about their diagnosis, staging and next steps, the nurse navigator is busy listening and taking notes that they will later give to the patient. After the oncologist leaves the room, the nurse navigator will stay and recap the meeting with the patient. Navigators provide education, resources, information, and help to identify barriers to care and treatment.

“I feel it’s fulfilling to help somebody when they’re scared,” said Peggy Malone, oncology nurse navigator, OSF HealthCare. “I always tell my patients the most fearful part is the unknown. I tell them once you’ve had your first treatment, once you really understand what we do here and once you understand what is happening to you, you’ll feel a lot better.”

Many nurse navigators, like Peggy Malone, are also cancer survivors. That personal experience can be extremely beneficial to a patient who is going through a cancer journey for the first

time, coping not only with a physical illness but dealing with fear, anxiety and plenty of questions.

“Helping the patient with the mental aspect of the disease can be tricky sometimes,” said Lisa Bruno, oncology nurse navigator, OSF HealthCare. “We have to figure out where the patient is coming from. I use my own personal story as a lead in to help them deal with their own diagnosis. I myself was diagnosed with breast cancer and I am an open book when it comes to my patients because I tell them ‘I have been there.’ I know how traumatic this can be and I know how hard it is to tell your children.”

Oncology nurse navigators are always available to their patients. They share their phone number and are willing to talk through issues or answer tough questions. Nurse navigators will often give tours of the facility so that patients can become familiar with the space where they will receive chemotherapy. Most importantly, oncology nurse navigators serve as a sounding board, someone to turn to during the ups and downs of a cancer journey.

“The most gratifying part of my job is seeing a patient get through their treatment and come out on the other side a survivor,” said Lisa Bruno, oncology nurse navigator, OSF HealthCare.

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