

spotlight

PeaceHealth St. Joseph Cancer Center, Bellingham, Washington



PeaceHealth St. Joseph Cancer Center is a Commission on Cancer (CoC) accredited hospital-based facility in Bellingham, Washington, serving the Pacific Northwest. The new cancer center is just three years old and prior to its construction, fragmentation of cancer care in the community was a challenge for patients and providers. Medical oncology was located in a multidisciplinary clinic, while radiation oncology was housed on the hospital campus, and infusion was located within the hospital. “As you can imagine this was a huge burden for patients to travel around to all of these locations to receive their care and certainly was not ideal,” said Jennie Crews, MD, FACP, medical director at PeaceHealth St. Joseph Cancer Center.

Recognizing the need for consolidation of services, hospital leadership and staff led the charge for building a dedicated cancer center. Through the support of philanthropic and community funding, the PeaceHealth St. Joseph Cancer Center now houses medical oncology, radiation oncology, infusion, pharmacy, clinical trials, complementary therapies, and a wide array of support services as part of what the cancer center terms “integrated cancer care.”

“The name ‘integrated cancer care’ came from the fact that in building our brand new cancer center we are able to bring all of these services together and integrate them to the convenience of the patient,” said Dr. Crews.

Services Under One Roof

The 35,000-square-foot cancer center works to provide state-of-the-art clinical

and supportive services in one convenient location.

The medical oncology department is staffed by four board-certified oncologists, and the centralized location of care delivery means that patients can schedule and see both medical and radiation oncology on the same day. Radiation oncology performs IMRT and SBRT procedures with two Varian linear accelerators and the cancer center also recently launched a stereotactic brain program.

The infusion center includes 16 private suites equipped with TV and Internet access overlooking the cancer center’s healing garden.

Nurse navigation services are currently available for head and neck, lung, and breast cancer patients. Support services include:

- Nutrition counseling
- Financial counseling
- Social work
- Massage
- Acupuncture
- Support groups
- Tai Chi
- Yoga classes
- Meditation
- Art therapy.

Select artwork by patients participating in art therapy is displayed on the walls of the new cancer center.

A physician assistant (PA) serves as the survivorship coordinator for cancer patients. She sees patients completing curative therapy and compiles their treatment summary and their care plans. She also refers patients to any kind of psychosocial

support they may need at the completion of their treatment. In addition, the PA spends a portion of her time seeing acute patients as the cancer center’s urgent care provider.

Bringing Clinical Trials to the Community

The cancer center maintains a robust clinical trials program through an aggressive screening process. Screening is based on new pathologic diagnoses within the community; every new diagnosis of cancer gets reviewed by the clinical trials department. Members of the department proactively write letters to referring physicians to say they have identified a patient—who may not have even seen anyone at the cancer center yet—but who may be a candidate for an open clinical trial. Clinical trials staff members also participate in all of the tumor boards.

“We have this beautiful new cancer center, but our program actually extends beyond the walls of this building,” said Dr. Crews. PeaceHealth St. Joseph Cancer Center offers a number of outreach programs to the community, including screenings for various cancers, educational programs, and a program called Cancer 101. Hosted at the cancer center and open to the community, speakers present on topics such as nutrition, exercise, and integrative oncology.

To further strengthen ties to the surrounding community, the cancer center’s advisory committee includes physicians in the community who are not employed by PeaceHealth who assist in setting strategies that meet the cancer care needs in the community.



Multidisciplinary Lung Program

PeaceHealth St. Joseph Cancer Center partners with various outside providers and community agencies to better serve their patient population. A major initiative to come out of a recognized community need is the multidisciplinary lung program. A lung cancer conference is held weekly to review all abnormal CT scans and also discuss management of diagnosed lung cancer patients. Participants include: thoracic surgery, pulmonary, radiation oncology, medical oncology, radiology, pathology, and primary care. PeaceHealth St. Joseph Cancer Center also offers lung cancer screening in the community. This initiative has proved successful with a demonstrated reduction in time from diagnosis to treatment due to the efficiency of the navigation services.

Through this program, the cancer center works very closely with primary care physicians in the health system and community to identify:

- What is appropriate follow-up for lung cancer patients?
- What tests are needed and who should perform them?
- How can patients transition back to their primary care provider in a timely fashion?

“With the projected rise in cancer cases and the workforce shortage we’re facing, we need to partner and find new ways to deliver care so that these patients aren’t relying completely on oncologists for their follow-up and survivorship care,” said Dr. Crews.

Reaching the Rural Population

As a comprehensive cancer center, PeaceHealth St. Joseph Cancer Center serves as a hub for a large catchment area of cancer care that includes very remote regions. “Even patients who aren’t flying here from those remote areas can have difficulty getting to their appointments,” said Dr. Crews. The cancer center operates two satellite clinics for chemotherapy consultations and follow-up care: one on San Juan Island and another in Ketchikan, Alaska, locations that providers can only reach by plane or boat. The navigation program is critical in assisting patients with transportation issues. The navigators work closely with social work to arrange transportation and also housing for patients undergoing prolonged treatment.

The cancer center has a patient assistance program supported by philanthropic funds that distributes taxi vouchers, gas cards, or

bus coins to help patients get to the cancer center and home again. Community resources include the American Cancer Society’s Road to Recovery for volunteer drivers and The San Juan Eagles Treatment Support Mission Project, which provides free flights for cancer patients from San Juan Island to nearby airports. 

Select Support Services:

- Financial Counseling
- Nutrition Counseling
- Navigation
- Survivorship
- Art Therapy
- Chaplain
- Support Groups

Percentage of patients accrued to clinical trials annually: 8%

Number of new analytic cases seen in 2014: 983.