

spotlight

Cowell Family Cancer Center Traverse City, Michigan



More than 10 years ago, two medical oncologists, a radiation oncologist, and a gynecological oncologist approached Munson Healthcare—a health network that services 27 counties in northern Michigan and the eastern upper peninsula—with a proposal. From their disparate locations in this rural area, it was clear to them that their patients would be better served at a central cancer center. In 2015, after seven years of development and input from 10 different committees, including a patient and caregiver advisory committee, that vision became reality as Cowell Family Cancer Center was opened in Traverse City.

The cancer center occupies a three-story building on the hospital campus, including a basement equipped with meeting space. On the second floor is a 44-chair infusion center with a dedicated oncology pharmacy at its center, staffed by six certified pharmacy technicians and five oncology pharmacists, four of whom are board certified. Physician practices are located on the third floor with offices next to cancer research for easy access and consultation.

All radiation oncology services for the network are located on-site on the first floor including high- and low-dose rate brachytherapy, and three TrueBeam linear accelerators with cone beam computed tomography and Vision RT imaging capabilities. “For what many consider a smaller rural cancer center,” says Neil R. Forster, MD, radiation oncologist, “I was very impressed by the breadth of treatment options and equipment available for our patients. It’s equivalent to—if not better

than—what I trained on in large metropolitan cancer centers.”

Most of Munson Healthcare’s medical oncology—hematology, radiation oncology, gynecologic oncology, and support staff are based out of the Cowell Family Cancer Center, with surgical and interventional care provided at the nearby Munson Medical Center. The center is staffed by eight medical oncologists, five radiation oncologists, one gynecologic oncologist, five nurse practitioners, and a physician assistant. Cowell Family Cancer Center is accredited by the Commission on Cancer, the National Accreditation Program for Breast Cancers, and the American College of Radiology, with a Quality Oncology Practice Initiative certification coming soon.

Care Close to Home

Cowell Family Cancer Center sees more than 1,800 new cases annually in Traverse City, but in the 24 counties in rural Michigan that Munson serves, the distance from patients to the cancer center can be too far to overcome. As a result, services were expanded to allow clinicians to travel from Cowell to one of Munson Healthcare’s six satellite oncology and infusion clinics, located within regional acute care hospitals. This arrangement allows the cancer center to see nearly 1,000 additional patients closer to home, a hub-and-spoke model envisioned by the center’s founding members.

Cowell Family Cancer Center has also spearheaded the integration of Aria, an oncology-specific electronic health record (EHR), in these remote locations. The EHR, which has been launched in two regional

sites, allows medical oncologists who travel from Cowell to access patient medical records remotely. Aria also integrates with radiation oncology and oncology pharmacy, which cuts down on redundancy and improves care coordination. The EHR includes built-in triggers to refer patients to supportive care services like fitness, social work, nutrition, and financial advocacy. As access to cancer care in the rural communities continues to grow, additional support services, including nurse navigation and fitness and nutrition services, are being developed at these locations.

Says David S. Gordon, MD, physician chief of cancer services, “The pharmacy was way ahead of the wave in using the EHR, putting all the regimens into it so they were easily accessible by physicians, making adjustments as time passed, and creating guidelines. I think it’s made a huge difference.” The five regional infusion suites have on-site oncology pharmacy services, with one site having a board-certified oncology pharmacist and dedicated oncology certified nurses.

The Multidisciplinary Care Model

Cowell Family Cancer Center is dedicated to improving coordination among cancer care team members to streamline the patient experience, and programs like the Multidisciplinary Thoracic Oncology Program demonstrate that commitment. This on-site multidisciplinary clinic performs staging and workup of newly diagnosed lung, esophageal, and thymus cancer patients. The clinic meets once weekly at a collabora-

tive tumor board, where all disciplines can weigh in on the best plan of care. Patients are provided with the treatment plan and itinerary and meet supportive cancer care team members, such as social work, palliative care, and financial navigation, before they leave for the day. This same-day multidisciplinary approach reduces the number of times the patient must make a trip to the cancer center, because many are traveling further than 50 miles one way.

The Multidisciplinary Thoracic Oncology Program team also reviews positive pathology reports submitted by remote providers and assesses them for participation in the program. Smoking is within the top three health disparities in northern Michigan, so the program offers low-dose computed tomography screenings regionally to detect early lung cancers. This approach has decreased the time from diagnosis to treatment plan by 7 weeks (3 weeks vs. 10 weeks) on average.

Another example of Cowell's multidisciplinary approach is its participation as a testing site in the Association of Community Cancer Centers' Optimal Care Coordination Model. The Optimal Care Coordination Model is dedicated to improving access to and quality of care for Medicaid patients with lung cancer. As part of this initiative, Cowell started the "Freedom from Smoking" program, which offers weekly tobacco cessation classes taught by American Lung Association-certified thoracic oncology nurses, as well as individual counseling.


These programs are available for both patients and members of the community.

Supportive Services

What sets Cowell apart in its multidisciplinary approach are its integrative and supportive services. According to staff, there was deliberate thought to embed evidence-based integrative therapies into clinical practice to improve the physical, mental, and emotional health of cancer patients. Health and wellness providers have their own dedicated space within the cancer center, where the most common services include yoga, meditation, acupuncture, massage, personal fitness, and music therapy. For patients with peripheral neuropathy or other symptoms, massage therapists roam the infusion center offering free introductory services.

A tranquil meditation room is available for open reflective time for patients, caregivers, staff, and scheduled sessions led by a meditation-certified provider, and the Essentials Boutique includes private fitting space for wig consultation services, prosthetic fitting, and compression garment fitting. The boutique also provides an array of retail products including head coverings, safe skin care products, and cosmetics that are free from harmful chemicals, as well as postmastectomy garments including bras, athletic wear, and bathing suits.

Says Kathleen LaRaia, MS, executive director of oncology, "Within Munson Healthcare and at the Cowell Family Cancer

Center, our emphasis is on the patient and the patient's experience. Our patients have always been at the center of everything we do, and that's reflected in our slogan: *"Imagine healing here, where everything matters."* 



Select Support Services

- Nutrition services
- Support groups
- Art and music therapy
- Essentials boutique

Number of new analytic cases seen annually: 1,700 (2,500 regionally)