

The Role of a Breast Cancer Nurse Case Manager

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At the MeritCare Health System in Fargo, N.D., approximately 240 women are diagnosed with breast cancer each year. Many of these patients live in rural communities and must travel 150-200 miles each way to visit an oncologist. To streamline the treatment process for these patients, the MeritCare Foundation approved funding for a two-year pilot project that added a full-time breast cancer nurse case manager to the cancer center in December 2001. The program is continuing and will be funded by the MeritCare Health System. It was also hoped that the new position would improve coordination of consults and appointments, increase the educational resources offered, improve the identification of potential participants for surgical research trials, and offer psychosocial support following a breast cancer diagnosis.

Today, the breast cancer nurse case manager serves as a care navigator for women with breast cancer within the MeritCare Health System. Among other responsibilities, the breast cancer nurse case managers arrange appointments with surgeons, radiation oncologists, and medical oncologists; coordinate care in a timely manner; and save the patient extra trips to the center.

HOW IT WORKS

The breast cancer nurse case manager's office is located in the MeritCare Breast Clinic, which provides screening and diagnostic evaluation for breast health concerns. Currently, the position is shared by two nurses with master's degrees, one of whom is currently working on her PhD. One of these nurses also works two days a week in the cancer risk assessment program and uses the breast cancer nurse case manager position to identify women and families that could benefit from risk assessment services.

The two breast cancer nurse case managers report to the executive partner of the Roger Maris Cancer Center, who in partnership with a medical oncologist executive partner, is responsible for the overall administration of the oncology services in the health system. The breast cancer nurse case managers are further supported by a multidisciplinary team of radiologists, surgeons, medical oncologists, and radiation oncologists, who they meet with on a quarterly basis.

The primary role of the breast cancer nurse case manager is to help breast cancer patients efficiently navigate within the healthcare system. The journey from diagnosis through treatment is unique for each patient, and flexibility is a key component of the breast cancer nurse case manager role. Any given day, the breast cancer nurse case manager may be found meeting with a newly diagnosed

patient, visiting a post-op patient in the hospital, discussing clinical research trials with a pre-op patient, offering support to a patient who believes her world is falling apart, reviewing pathology reports, or discussing specific patient concerns with a physician.

Referrals to the breast cancer nurse case managers come from a variety of sources within the MeritCare Health System, including surgeons, primary care physicians, breast clinic staff, medical and radiation oncologists, and referral specialists (see Figure on page 11).

At the MeritCare Health System, patients tend to rely on the breast cancer nurse case managers the most in the time immediately following a positive biopsy report—which is one of the most stressful, confusing, and traumatic periods in the entire cancer experience. Because being diagnosed with breast cancer is such an overwhelming experience, the breast cancer nurse case manager contacts a newly diagnosed patient as soon as possible after she has received her biopsy results.

Women respond to the diagnosis of breast cancer in very different ways. Some women seek out all the educational material they can find. Some need to be alone for a day or two to sort out their thoughts. Some require support but find that they are unable to discuss information about breast cancer while the news is still so fresh. The role of the breast cancer nurse case manager is to meet the woman wherever she is in this process, offering support and information while helping the woman take the next step on her journey.

VALUE ADDED

The benefits of having a breast cancer nurse case manager were apparent soon after the implementation of the pilot program. Anecdotally, patients often said how grateful they were to know that they were not facing this experience alone and appreciated knowing that they could call someone with their questions or concerns.

Coordinating appointments for the patient also proved to be an invaluable part of the breast cancer nurse case manager's job. Women from out of town whose breast cancer nurse case managers scheduled all their appointments for the same day have expressed deep appreciation for this service.

The breast cancer nurse case manager can also make sure that a patient who needs to meet with a specialist prior to surgery can do so. For example, a woman may be reluctant to have a lumpectomy because of concerns about radiation, but meeting with a radiation oncologist will help her weigh all the facts prior to surgery. A pre-op appointment with a reconstructive surgeon may also help

a woman decide whether a mastectomy with reconstruction will be the right treatment for her:

Because breast cancer nurse case managers have frequent contacts with the patient, they can often see potential health problems developing and do something about them before a patient ends up in the emergency room (i.e., earlier identification of post-op infections, post-op pain medication reactions). The breast cancer nurse case managers also help patients create lists of questions for their doctors prior to an appointment, which results in more effective use of the appointment time.

Both physicians and patients appreciate that the breast cancer nurse case managers can carry the patient's "story" and communicate the patient's special circumstances to those providing care. Perhaps the patient is the sole caregiver for a disabled husband, or she is so distraught about her condition that she has suffered increasing depression, or her best friend just died of breast cancer. Her caregivers need to know about these issues, which can have a great effect on the patient's attitude and response to treatment. Sometimes a patient will request that the breast cancer nurse case manager accompany her

to appointments to serve as a calming influence and help ease communication with the physician. These actions allow the Roger Maris Cancer Center treatment team to individualize care for their patients with breast cancer.

AN EVOLVING ROLE

Some of the projects with which the breast cancer nurse case managers are currently involved include:

- Setting up formal consultation planning meetings to help the patient prepare for visits with the surgeon, medical oncologist, or radiation oncologist
- Writing a breast cancer education manual
- Creating a patient-focused care pathway
- Creating best practices to document ongoing patient-case manager contacts
- Conducting six-week education and support courses for patients
- Devising appropriate methods for measuring clinical outcomes in breast cancer care
- Participating in a breast cancer tumor board where treatment for new patients is planned
- Creating a computer program that tracks patients, with controlled access for breast cancer nurse case managers
- Increasing cooperative clinical trial involvement
- Increasing participation in community outreach.

A SNAPSHOT OF THE MERITCARE HEALTH SYSTEM

The MeritCare Health System includes the MeritCare Hospital, the Roger Maris Cancer Center; 25 primary care clinics throughout North Dakota and Minnesota, and 352 physicians practicing in 70 specialty areas. The cancer center staff consists of seven medical oncologists, three radiation oncologists, and one pediatric oncologist. The current MeritCare breast cancer program includes:

- A breast cancer treatment team that includes surgeons, medical and radiation oncologists, plastic/reconstructive surgeons, pathologists, a psychologist, a chaplain, a social worker, and other disciplines as needed
- A diagnostic/screening breast clinic
- A cancer risk assessment program
- Breast cancer treatment research trials
- A lymphedema program.

The breast cancer nurse case manager program is still evolving at the MeritCare Health System, and the directions it could take in the future are difficult to predict; however, the breast cancer nurse case managers have added value in many ways. The new position has support from all areas of the health system where breast cancer patients are seen, and team members from all areas have offered suggestions to improve and streamline the program. Plans are also being formulated for development of a nurse case manager program for other cancers using this program as a model. Whatever the future holds, the breast cancer nurse case manager has inarguably reinforced the MeritCare philosophy of making sure each patient has the best healthcare experience possible. 🗣️

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Referral Process for Breast Cancer Nurse Case Managers at the Roger Maris Cancer Center in North Dakota

