

Providence Cancer Center at Providence Alaska Medical Center

First-Class Technology in Nature's Majesty

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The common notion is that Alaska is isolated, we live in igloos, and it's dark all the time,” said Anne Rydesky, R.N., M.H.A.,

director of oncology services for the Providence Cancer Center at Providence Alaska Medical Center. “Nothing could be further from the truth. We offer the same level of care a patient can receive in the lower 48, with all the current technology and therapy options and a number of national clinical trials as well.” Rydesky said the center expects designation as an American

College of Surgeons' Community Hospital Comprehensive Cancer Program in 2003.

Located in Anchorage, Providence is one of only two hospitals in Alaska where people with cancer can receive state-of-the-art therapy (the other is Alaska Regional Medical Center, also in Anchorage). A Life Guard helicopter with its own rooftop pad facilitates access, and Rydesky said that many patients fly in from as far away as the Kenai Peninsula, the Aleutian chain near Japan, and Gamble Island near Russia using the state's network of bush airlines. More than 57 languages and dialects are spoken in

the Anchorage school system, and the hospital cares for patients with a wide variety of ethnicities and income levels.

Rydesky believes the hospital's first-class radiation oncology department and infusion center deserve special mention. With a Varian 6/100 linear accelerator for stereotactic radiosurgery, a Varian 2300 with multileaf collimation, brachytherapy, and a 3-D treatment planning system, the radiation oncology program matches that of any institution in the country. PET scanning is expected to arrive in 2003, and the department plans to acquire an ACUSIM CT simulator

Selected Patient Support Services

- Community and American Cancer Society (ACS) support groups for breast cancer, prostate cancer, and ovarian cancer
- The ACS “I Can Cope” program is run twice a year
- Bereavement groups will be added in 2002
- Dedicated oncology social worker
- Genetics counseling
- Providence House for patients and their families

- Total Hospital Bed Size: 345
- Dedicated Cancer Unit Beds: 12
- Number of New Analytic Cancer Cases Per Year: 752
- Managed Care Penetration in the State: 0 percent



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE PROVIDENCE ALASKA MEDICAL CENTER

PROFILE

and a new linear accelerator with IMRT in the future. The department is staffed by a physicist, two dosimetrists (trained at Vanderbilt and M.D. Anderson), four therapists, a radiologic engineer, and two nurses with OCN® certification.

The infusion center is open seven days a week and has two pharmacists (one a Pharm.D. certified in oncology) on site. There is a general tumor board and specialty boards for breast, chest, and pediatric cancers. The pediatric oncology program began in July 2000 with the arrival of Melissa Corcoran, M.D., from Children's Hospital in Seattle, Wash., and the pediatric tumor board is conducted via videoconference with Children's every week. The only treatments for which both adult and pediatric patients must leave the state are total skin irradiation and bone marrow or stem cell transplants.

Providence offers its cancer patients more than 60 clinical trials, including the SELECT and STAR prevention trials and the Bexxar monoclonal antibody clinical trial. It is an affiliate of RTOG, and has access to SWOG and NSABP studies through the Virginia-Mason CCOP. The hospital also belongs to the Puget Sound Oncology Consortium (PSOC) at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, through which it can access trials associated with GOG and original studies done by PSOC members. A nurse with OCN® and CCRA (Certified Clinical Research Associate) credentials helps administer the studies.

The cancer center's prostate screening program reached 640 men in 2001. Providence received a \$10,000 grant from "The Men's Five Miler," a local fundraising race, to contact more minority men for prostate cancer screening. That effort has been successful.

Patient-Centered Care

Rydesky said that Providence is especially proud of its flourishing quilt and stuffed rabbit program for children receiving chemotherapy, and the proposed "Rabbitt Den," a comfortable place for patients to rest between tests, appointments,

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NORMAN
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and treatments. About \$37,000 has been raised for the project by the family and friends of former patient Terry "Rabbitt" Carter, a long-time Alaska Pipeline Service Company employee and heavy equipment operator, and the facility will be established as soon as space becomes available. The women of the "Rabbitt Habit," an auxiliary arm of the "Friends of Rabbitt Carter," started the sewing projects in Carter's memory. So many quilts have been donated that Providence can hang some on the walls of the pediatric infusion center, wrapping the treatment room in a feeling of coziness and warmth.

With so many out-of-town patients, the medical center established Providence House, an on-campus residence with 28 rooms, in February 1983. Each room has two beds, and rollaway beds can be brought in so families can stay together. The cost is \$45/night (inexpensive for Alaska) and stays are unlimited. Donations and hospital programs support patients who cannot pay the fee. Karel Atkinson, Providence House's director, said the facility is mostly used by cancer patients, high-risk maternity patients, heart patients, and the relatives of premature babies and trauma patients, including unlucky wilderness tourists. The average stay for cancer patients is six to eight

weeks. The house is designed like a lodge, with plenty of common space in the kitchen to talk. There are TVs in every room, several lounges, and a computer. Patients can eat in one of the hospital cafeterias or cook their own meals with donated supplies, and twice a week a volunteer comes in and bakes cookies to make the house smell more like home.

Diaries are available where patients can record their experiences for each other and future patients to share. Because many patients stay so long, they form close friendships and keep in touch after their treatment is finished.

Atkinson said hearing patients' stories is one of the rewards of her job. "We have patients who take a dogsled to a lake where they board a small plane that takes them to an airport where they catch a big plane to come to Anchorage. Our Native patients tell us about their villages, which they miss very much."

On staff at Providence House since it opened, Atkinson thought one of the best things about the hospital and cancer center is its beautiful setting. "There are mountains all around the city, and Cook Inlet is just to the west where you can see beluga whales. The Northern Lights are nearly always visible and the animals don't seem to care whether they are in the city or outside of it. Bears have been known to come by, moose roam all over the campus (including mothers with babies), and I saw a fox trotting along just the other day. They are wild animals, though, and we have to tell people not to pet them." One moose the staff calls Norman is a frequent and welcome visitor.

The hospital has had to expand quickly to meet the demands of Alaska's population boom. With the state growing fast, staffing is a major problem. There is a critical nursing shortage, and skilled oncology personnel are at a premium. Having already conquered the cold, long distances, and the problems of incorporating top-of-the-line technology with little support close by, Providence Cancer Center will undoubtedly be able to meet this challenge as well. ❏