



What a Patient Navigator Brings to Cancer Care

by Sandy Seevers

In 2003 St. Vincent Hospital in Indianapolis, Ind., was preparing to open a new state-of-the-art cancer care facility. Hospital leadership was committed to adding a patient navigator to the cancer center staff. Sandy Seevers, the center's patient navigator, talks about how her role has evolved.

As a business owner for more than a decade, I specialized in work processes and the redesign of work environments to improve, streamline, and enhance overall efficiency. Success in my business required collaboration, teamwork, partnership, cooperation, shared resources, and more.

Then, in 2001, I was diagnosed with cancer. I returned to work after nine months of treatment. Professionally, I no longer felt that I was making a difference or contributing to the greater good. I learned about the opening for a patient navigator at St. Vincent's Oncology Center and was hired in February 2003.

While my professional experience has given me skills and resources that I draw on in my work as patient navigator, my life experiences also contribute to what I bring to this role. Being a cancer survivor has given me knowledge of the treatment methods and emotional challenges of the disease. I know the longing to be well and the desire of wanting just a few minutes of respite from the pain when it's every day all day.

Receiving care from caregivers during my cancer journey gave me an opportunity to ask for help and allow others to take care of me—a challenge for many people. I've recently become a caregiver to family members—giving me a deeper level of compassion for caregivers.

I am a trained hospice volunteer, and offer support for patients and families in hospice care.

The Navigator's Role

“So what is a patient navigator?” When I first started my job, I was asked that question every day. Members of the oncology staff, associates, medical groups, patients, and community organizations, all wanted to know—*what do you do?*

Initially, clinical staff had some uncertainty about my role. This was due, in part, to the newness of the position, but also to questions about the competencies of a non-clinical person in a clinical setting and to uncertainty about boundaries. It is critical that patient navigators define what they do and what they do *not* do. The patient navigator does not provide medical advice or give opinions regarding medical treatments or choice of healthcare provider. The patient navigator does not breach the physician/patient relationship.

Once clinical staff had an understanding of my role, we were able to successfully communicate and collaborate on common goals.

In the Beginning

I began by meeting one-on-one with heads of all the key departments within the organization. I educated myself about the processes and procedures that patients come in contact with during treatment, including: social services, financial services, radiation oncology, oncology medical groups, dietitians, library services, medical imaging, medical records, pastoral care, cultural diversity, hospice, rehabilitation, and more. Then, I turned my attention to community resources. I met with the directors of community organizations and services to which I could refer patients.

Today, my duties include: *Listening to patients.* Often

patients need and want to be heard in a “non-clinical” way. Patients and caregivers often talk with me about their feelings and the challenges they are facing. They trust me with their feelings and thoughts, and I take that responsibility seriously and respect their confidentiality.

Helping patients access information. Educating yourself about cancer can be an overwhelming and frightening experience. I can help patients with a “just this much” style of learning by providing information about the different stages they are going through one step at a time. I am able to provide reliable Internet resources and informational materials tailored for each patient's specific needs.

Connecting patients to support systems. I help connect patients and caregivers to support resources including case managers, social services, community cancer organizations, dietitians, and financial services.

Helping patients navigate their treatment schedules. For patients that want assistance, I can help them with the process of gathering their information and then show them how to organize, coordinate, and keep track of their doctor visits, appointments, tests, labs, written reports, and films.

As a Patient Navigator

Every day I am blessed. I get to sit close to patients and listen to their stories; hold the hand of a patient; and give and receive hugs. I have the opportunity to offer support to patients, and remind them that attitude is the one thing they can always control. Their gratitude for my support is always heartfelt. 🙏

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