

Benefits of a Multidisciplinary Thoracic Oncology Program

Huntington Hospital's MTOP Targets Lung Cancer

by Michael Buchholtz, MD, FACP

Recognizing that lung cancer is a disease requiring a multidisciplinary approach to diagnosis and treatment, a group of physicians established an innovative Multidisciplinary Thoracic Oncology Program (MTOP) at Huntington Hospital in Huntington, N.Y. Since 2001, the MTOP has met weekly and has reviewed more than 270 cases, offering numerous benefits to both patients and staff.

Because thoracic abnormalities often pose diagnostic dilemmas, as well as therapeutic challenges, several physicians at Huntington Hospital came to believe that the optimal way to offer state-of-the-art care to these patients would be an interdisciplinary approach involving numerous specialists. In my role as Chief of Hematology/Oncology, I obtained grant funding from Bristol Myers Squibb to travel with a team of physicians to the University of North Carolina to observe its successful multidisciplinary thoracic oncology program. I was accompanied on this site visit by Richard Byrnes, MD, chief of radiation oncology; Ernest Vomero, MD, chief of pulmonary and critical care medicine; and Gail Probst, RN, AOCN, director of cancer services. The two-day visit culminated in the development of a weekly MTOP case conference at Huntington Hospital, a 398-bed hospital on Long Island, with a voluntary attending medical staff of nearly 500.

At our hospital, the MTOP group consists of pulmonologists, surgeons, internists, medical oncologists, radiation oncologists, diagnostic radiologists, pathologists, and oncology nurses. Often, after further evaluation based on

the recommendation of the committee, patients are found not to have a malignancy. If a malignancy is diagnosed, the input of a range of specialists is essential to determine the best approach for cure and/or palliation.

Because all specialists provide input, we are able to identify the most appropriate care, as well



as limit possibly dangerous and unnecessary diagnostic interventions. In addition, MTOP participation from so many specialties actually streamlines patients' access to each specialist. Not only is the time from diagnosis to treatment significantly reduced, each patient effectively receives the benefit of several consultants simultaneously.

Here's how our MTOP program works. Between four and six case presentations are made each week. The conference is coordinated by Gail Probst, RN, AOCN, director of cancer services. The meetings, which last between 20 to 40 minutes, are held in the conference room adjacent to our Radiology Department. On average seven physicians regularly attend the

MTOP meetings. While the number of physicians attending has remained steady, an increasing variety of physicians attends. Attendance is strictly voluntary, and there is no Medicare or insurance reimbursement provided.

The frequency of MTOP meetings enhances the ability of conference participants to both care for patients and share new information and data in a timely fashion. When one or more MTOP participants attend a conference or learn about a new clinical trial, information is disseminated to the entire group.

While widespread lung cancer screening remains controversial, one of the goals of Huntington's MTOP group is to create and institutionalize realistic screening guidelines. To help improve early detection efforts, the group is attempting to identify those individuals whose smoking history, pulmonary function, and other factors put them at greatest risk for lung cancer.

Follow-up reports on patients whose cases have been presented to the group provide MTOP participants with information on the efficacy of the evaluations and recommendations they have made. This in turn helps guide future recommendations. Close follow-up is especially essential for those patients who are enrolled in clinical trials.

Participants find MTOP conferences to be a particularly valuable experience in that they are fast paced, enhance decision-making, are clinically relevant, and offer an intellectually satisfying opportunity to work collaboratively with their colleagues. 📍

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