

Introducing...

National Clinical Trials Initiative Month

by Linda Versea, APRN

Clinical trials are the engine of progress that drives forward efforts to prevent and treat cancer. Today, the field of oncology is in the midst of a revolution in how we diagnose and treat cancer. Molecular medicine and targeted therapies have led to an explosion of new anti-cancer medicines that must be tested in human clinical trials.

Whether an individual receives treatment at a hospital-based cancer center, a freestanding cancer center, or an oncology practice, every cancer patient should be made aware of clinical trials that might be of benefit. According to the National Cancer Institute (NCI), an estimated 3 percent of adults with cancer participate in clinical trials.¹ As clinicians, we must work to improve clinical trial accrual. As part of my efforts to raise awareness nationwide of clinical trials as a treatment option for cancer patients, I am spearheading a grassroots effort to have December designated as “National Cancer Clinical Trials Initiative Month.”

For the past six years, I have served as Oncology Research Coordinator for the Whittingham Cancer Center at Norwalk Hospital in Norwalk, Conn. In our ACoS-approved community hospital comprehensive cancer program, research trials are available to patients through our affiliate memberships in CALGB and NSABP, the CTSU, and from industry. We run Phase I, II and III trials, as well as offer our patients compassionate use access to important medicines.

My work is both challenging and rewarding. Enrolling patients on a clinical trial is not as simple as having trials “available,” especially in the community setting. Patients may be fearful of investigational medicines, overwhelmed by complicated consent forms, and turned off by the prospect of receiving a placebo in a randomized study. Other willing

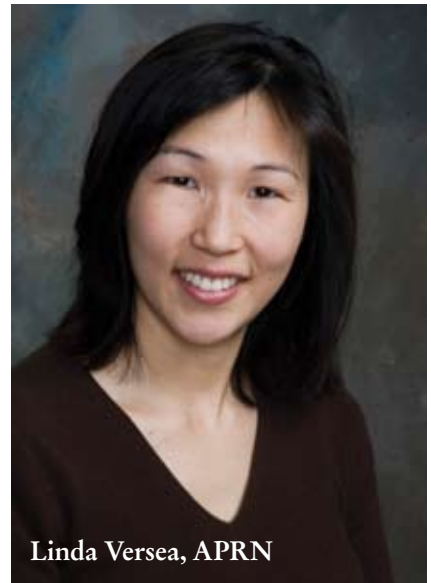
patients are “screen failures,” who do not meet protocol eligibility criteria for one reason or another. Still, the rewards of helping enroll patients in clinical trials are profound. I now know many patients living years beyond what was predicted as a result of their participation in a clinical trial.

Given the tremendous importance of cancer clinical trials, designation of a *National Clinical Trials Initiative Month* seems an appropriate way to bring together cancer organizations and caregivers across the country to focus attention on the critical importance of clinical cancer research.

My grassroots efforts began on the state level. In December 2006, I enlisted the support of Norwalk Mayor Richard Moccia and the local chapter of the American Cancer Society to proclaim the first “Cancer Clinical Trials Awareness Month: The Gift of Hope” in the state of Connecticut. From this experience grew my hope to expand this initiative into a nationwide awareness campaign with a goal of increasing the numbers of patients enrolled in trials.

With input from colleagues, especially Richard Frank, MD, the director of Cancer Research at our hospital and recipient of ACCC’s 2007 David King Community Clinical Scientist Award, I went a step beyond simply raising awareness of clinical trials and actually challenged clinicians to offer their patients a cancer clinical trial during Cancer Clinical Trials Awareness Month. It is my hope that, by sparking this initiative, all oncology practices—whether or not they offer clinical trials—will inform their patients about clinical trials availability in their communities.

For providers and patients nationwide, increased enrollment in clinical trials will enable us to more



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quickly reach our common goals of finding safer, life-prolonging therapies, and expanding our knowledge about the causes of cancer.

Our first “National Cancer Clinical Trials Initiative Month” will be held in December 2007. During this month, I encourage every oncologist to try to enroll at least one patient in a clinical trial. This initiative is supported by the Association of Community Cancer Centers, and has been presented to the National Oncology Nursing Society (ONS). And our hope is that other leading oncology organizations and patient advocacy groups will join in this effort. If you are interested in helping with this worthwhile initiative, please email me at: Linda.versea@norwalkhealth.org for information. 📧

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References

¹National Cancer Institute. *Cancer Clinical Trials: The Basic Workbook*. Available online at: www.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials/resources/basicworkbook. Last accessed Sept. 25, 2007.