

Survivorship: We are All in This Together

by Richard B. Reiling, MD, FACS

From my previous columns, you can see that ACCC is serious about encouraging all our members to establish comprehensive survivorship programs. This commitment was reflected at our recent 24th National Oncology Economics Conference in Dallas, which featured several presentations on survivorship issues, and even more are planned for our upcoming Annual National Meeting this April in Baltimore.

I've written about a survivor's need for a "prescription for the rest of my life." This is a goal the Association would like to begin tackling. It is a goal that will continue to be relevant in the years ahead, as we work to ensure that all patients have access to the full range of cancer care services.

As we strive to improve services to cancer survivors, keep in mind that the "prescription for the rest of a patient's life" should include not just the patient, but also those folks in the patient's life who have been affected by the cancer diagnosis—family, caregivers, and friends.

While the patient is undergoing treatment, it is relatively easy to understand how the disease is also affecting family and caregivers. In terms of our survivorship efforts, however, we need to expand our programs to help these same loved ones, especially dependent children of cancer survivors. While I was a practicing surgeon I often heard from close relatives that I should not tell the patient that he or she had cancer or how long the patient had to live. The loved one's perception was that the patient "could not handle" this information, but actually the family member was saying, "I cannot take the fact that my husband



has cancer...so how can he?" In my experience cancer patients often handle their cancer better than their family members. The importance of ensuring that family, caregivers, and loved ones receive appropriate survivorship support is important to helping them move forward as well. Our society recognizes the importance of providing grief counselors in response to many large-scale disasters, but much less is expended for these single disasters that occur daily in many families.

And professional caregivers—all of us—are involved in the life, survival, and cancer journey with our patients. Caring for cancer patients is not a one-time encounter. It is care provided over many repeat visits that can be very emotionally charged. Cancer care providers show their dedication daily in this ongoing battle against this disease.

As we prepare to provide a comprehensive survivorship program, we need to consider all of the players, including ourselves. Good communication between all of the caregivers—family and healthcare professionals—is equally important to the team members and the patient.

The quality hospitals, practices, and caregivers that make up the membership of ACCC will continue to be in the vanguard in the delivery of excellent care. ACCC's Cancer Program Guidelines describe what a high-quality cancer program should be. Our member programs work diligently to make this ideal a reality for cancer patients and their families around the country. As both a cancer survivor and a cancer care provider—I thank each of you for your dedication and service. We are all in this together. 📧

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