

The Regional Cancer Center

Singing River Hospital System, Pascagoula, Mississippi

Improving community access to state-of-the-art care and clinical trials

The Regional Cancer Center at Singing River Hospital System serves Pascagoula, Mississippi, and the surrounding area of Jackson County, located in the southeast corner of the state. In 1994, an 18,000-square-foot Regional Cancer Center was opened on the Singing River Hospital campus. The ACoS-approved program brings state-of-art cancer care to this semi-rural area, offering a full range of outpatient medical oncology and radiation oncology services in one convenient location. Since 2002, the Regional Cancer Center has averaged a 15 percent increase in patient visit volumes annually. To meet the growing demand for services, in 2005 the Regional Cancer Center at Singing River Hospital added 8,000-square feet of space. Also, to better serve the surrounding community, in 2004 the hospital system opened its freestanding outpatient Ocean Springs oncology clinic across the street from the system's Ocean Springs Hospital. This year, the cancer program's patient volumes increased 18 percent over the previous year's volumes; with the program seeing approximately 550 new cases in 2006. Leading cancer sites are lung, breast, prostate, colon and rectum, and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.



The Regional Cancer Center's NCI-grant research staff (at left) recently achieved a clinical trial accrual rate of nearly 10 percent.

Medical oncology services are all on one floor with physician offices and patient exam rooms adjacent to the chemotherapy infusion area, which includes four private infusion rooms and a 12-chair open-plan infusion area. The program is staffed with one nurse practitioner who serves as a nurse manager and 10 oncology-trained nurses. In 2006, the cancer program implemented the

ARIA medical oncology-specific electronic medical record (EMR) system and is now "paperless" for medical oncology. The EMR, which includes computerized physician order entry (CPOE), has helped better streamline operations as well as improve patient safety. It allows anyone involved with a particular patient real-time access to information related to the patient's care.

Since 2002, radiation oncology services located within the Cancer Center have included intensity modulated radiation therapy treatment with the program's Clinac®

21EX linear accelerator. Primary sites treated with IMRT are head and neck and prostate cancers. The program offers CT simulations and 3D treatment planning; brachytherapy for prostate cancer; and prostate seed implants. Patients



Grant funds help provide the services of patient navigator Amy Linton (on left).

Streamlining Access to Care

Currently, the Singing River Hospital System employs two medical oncologists, one of whom is also board certified in geriatric medicine, and one radiation oncologist. At the Regional Cancer Center, patients can receive the full range of services for the detection, diagnosis, treatment of cancer, and follow-up care in a single location.

Vital Statistics

- Total hospital bed size: Singing River Hospital 415 beds; Ocean Springs Hospital 136 beds
- Dedicated cancer bed units: 20-bed oncology inpatient unit at Singing River Hospital
- Number of new analytic cases seen in 2006: 546

Selected Support Services

- Support groups
- Social work services
- Nutrition services
- Patient navigation services
- Financial counselor services
- Camp Bluebird (adult cancer camp)

have access to state-of-the-art diagnostic imaging including PET/CT, 16- and 64-slice CT scanners, and digital mammography through the hospital system.

Serving the Underserved

The Cancer Center at Singing River Hospital is taking a leadership role in improving access to care for the medically underserved in its community. In 2003, the Singing River Hospital System was awarded a \$3.4 million Cancer Disparities Research Partnership (CDRP) Grant from the National Cancer Institute (NCI). The CDRP program aims to address cancer health disparities and encourage access to clinical trials for minority and under-served populations. "This particular funding is different from any other NCI funding, in that this is the only disparities program where the main awardee is a community hospital, not a university setting or an academic institution," said Maggie Ramsey Clarkson, RN, MS, grants program director at Singing River Hospital. The CDRP grant focuses on access to clinical research, outreach into the community, and patient navigation.

The overall goal of the CDRP is to improve access and accrual to cancer clinical trials for African American and historically underserved populations. Nationwide the level of accrual of African American and underserved populations in clinical trials is disproportionate to the disease burden. With the CDRP grant the Regional Cancer Center has access to clinical trial cooperative groups and is an affiliate member of RTOG through the University of Alabama-Birmingham, and an affiliate member of SWOG and COC through the University of Mississippi.

One key way the CDRP grant is improving access to care is helping to provide patient transportation. Traveling to the Cancer Center for treatment and care is a major obstacle for many local residents. Through NCI grant funding, the Cancer Pro-

gram has been able to hire a full-time patient navigator and a full-time driver to help patients comply with their doctor's visits, therapy, and appointment schedules. The patient navigator coordinates the driver's schedule with patients' needs. The CDRP grant is "providing patients access to state-of-the-art research protocols and providing patient



Thanks to the program's NCI Cancer Disparities Research Partnership grant, van driver Janice Taylor (on left) is able to offer transportation to and from the Regional Cancer Center for patients in Jackson County, which has no public transportation system.

navigation to help steer them through the medical maze," said Principal Investigator W. Sam Dennis, MD, PhD. Over the past year, the Cancer Center has also added one dedicated social worker and one dedicated financial counselor.

The grant research office staff includes one nurse and two medical technicians, i.e., one clinical research nurse (CRN) and two clinical research assistants (CRAs). Clarkson, grants program director, explained that the research staff is organized so that one CRA handles regulatory matters and the other handles case finding, while the research nurse handles case management. Clarkson said, "I am so proud of this group. They have done an outstanding job. We screen every single patient that comes through our door for clinical research."

These achievements are all the more remarkable given the fact that Hurricane Katrina left about 95 percent of Pascagoula flooded in 2005. Fortunately Singing River Hospital, which is located several miles inland, was spared and remained fully func-

tional throughout the hurricane and its aftermath.

"Our hospital fared very well. Both hospitals in our system [Singing River and Ocean Springs] were operational after the hurricane and that was a big benefit to our community and a credit to our whole staff," said Matt Sherer, MBA, MHA, cancer program administrator.

Because the Cancer Center is an outpatient area, it was evacuated and shut down during the hurricane. The program remained closed for about two weeks after the storm until staff was able to travel safely into work. Despite the fact that many staff lost everything in the storm, they returned to work, serving their community while rebuilding their lives.

"It's a credit not only to the staff in our cancer center but throughout the hospital that we continued to function as well as we did after Katrina," said Sherer.

The Cancer Center at Singing River is proud to offer cutting-edge cancer care in the community setting. "We want our patients to have the best

that's out there, and [the NCI grant] is a major factor in making sure that what's available through our cancer center is cutting edge.... The research staff is there for every tumor board. We are there with our case findings. We are there with our list of potential studies. There is a lot of interaction and discussion," said Clarkson.

Something to Celebrate

In April 2007, the cancer program hosted a celebration luncheon, *Research Drives Results*, to honor all of the program's research participants, presenting each with a tee-shirt bearing the message: *Proud to be a Research Driver*. "This is a commitment these patients are making to the future. We wanted them to understand how appreciative we were as an institution. Because they have committed their time, effort, and energy, we wanted to make sure that they know how much we value their participation," Clarkson said. "We have some patients that wear their tee-shirts in for treatment; they are taking such a positive spin on being participants in research." ❏