

## The Cancer Center at East Alabama Medical Center, Opelika, Alabama

Bringing quality care to the community

In 1992 the Cancer Center opened on the campus of East Alabama Medical Center (EAMC) in Opelika. The only hospital in fast-growing Lee County, which experienced a population growth rate of about 32 percent between 1990 and 2000, EAMC is a 352-bed public, non-profit acute care hospital and regional referral center serving a five-county area of east central Alabama. Until last year, the Cancer Center, which has been designated as a Community Cancer Center

by the American College of Surgeons Commission on Cancer since 1995, was spread out in three locations within EAMC. In fact, the cancer program had experienced such tremendous growth that its medical oncologist's office, infusion center, and cancer registry departments were placed in temporary locations while construction was performed. With the completion of a 10,000-square-foot addition in 2007, EAMC's Cancer Center is now under one roof, with services centralized in one location.

Today, visitors arrive at a dedicated Cancer Center entrance that opens into a spacious waiting area. Through a set of double doors, a hallway on the right houses the offices for the program's administrative staff, social worker, and cancer registry. A hallway on the left includes two medical oncologist offices, six exam rooms, and a nurses' station. The program's infusion center was increased from 8 chairs to 16 chairs during the expansion, and further expansion is likely in the future. A satellite oncology pharmacy, staffed by one full-time pharmacist and one full-time pharmacy technician, is located adjacent to the infusion area.

On a nearby hallway are the program's state-of-the-art radiation oncology facilities. In 2006 the program acquired a Varian iX linear accelerator and Eclipse treatment planning system. The system is able to fuse images from multiple modalities to aid in planning. The radiation oncology program uses the ARIA oncology management system.

Since August 2006, the program has been offering intensity modulated radiation therapy (IMRT) and image-guided radiation therapy (IGRT) with on-board imaging (OBI) and respiratory gating treatment options. These cutting-edge treatment modalities are being used primarily to treat cancers of the head and neck, prostate, brain, and pelvis. Other treatment modalities offered include Gliasite® Radiation Therapy System for brain tumors and a prostate seed implant program.

As a part of the expansion project, an additional vault was constructed, which will allow for the addition of a second linear accelerator if future need arises. Currently, this second vault is used as a treatment area for the center's high dose radiation (HDR) program. The



**Cindi's Library, located in the Cancer Center, offers cancer patients and their families free educational materials, books, and brochures, as well as two computers with Internet access.**

### Vital Statistics

- Total hospital bed size: 352
- Dedicated inpatient cancer unit beds: 15
- Number of new analytic cases seen in 2006: 555
- Top five treatment sites: breast, prostate, lung, colon, and bladder

### Selected Support Services

- Breast cancer support groups: *Reach for Recovery; Bosom Buddies*
- Breast Health Patient Navigator
- Touch Support Group
- Social Work services
- Chemotherapy Education/Orientation classes
- Dietitian Services
- Lymphedema Clinic
- Bethany House/Hospice

program uses HDR mainly to treat gynecologic and lung cancers.

## Patient and Community Outreach

Beyond the addition of new technology, the newly configured Cancer Center includes features specifically tailored to benefit its cancer patients and family members. For example, within the new Cancer Center is Cindi's Library, a comfortable, well-appointed resource library that offers patients and family members educational materials, books, and brochures, as well as Internet access. Lisa's Corner, a cozy nook within the library, contains books and materials for children of parents with cancer. Funds for Cindi's Library (the Cynthia Spooner Hankes Cancer Resource Center) and Lisa's Corner were donated by the community in memory of former cancer patients.

The Cancer Center's varied outreach activities include an annual breast cancer awareness walk, which drew more than 400 participants last year. The program also hosts an annual Survivors' Picnic each summer, which is attended by 600 patients and family members. In 2007 the Cancer Center partnered with nearby Auburn University to offer a special one-day mammography screening event for the university's employees.

## Improving Access to Care

The Cancer Center at EAMC, like many other programs nationwide, is facing the challenges of serving a significant population of underserved patients from the surrounding communities. One step the program has taken to improve patient access to mammography screening and follow-up is adding the services of a Breast Health Navigator. For more than two years, Colleen Alsobrook, RN, has worked to help streamline patient access to diagnostic mammograms and related biopsies. These Breast Health Navigator services are available to patients free of charge.

Initially, Alsobrook made follow-

up calls for about 35 physicians to schedule women for their diagnostic mammograms and biopsies, if needed. "My name is on every mammogram report that goes out," Alsobrook said. "It gives [patients] a personal contact if they have any questions or have trouble getting in touch with a doctor. They have a person they know they can call." Together with the Cancer Center's social worker, Chelsea Kroll, MSW,

"My name is on every mammogram report that goes out," **Alsobrook said.** "It gives [patients] a personal contact if they have any questions or have trouble getting in touch with a doctor."

Alsobrook helps provide patients with a handbook that lists community resources, educational materials, and information about support services and support groups such as Reach for Recovery and Bosom Buddies. The program also helps patients to access resources to defray the costs of mammograms through state funding for those who are eligible, and through the hospital's foundation.

Mammograms are offered at two sites: one on the EAMC campus and the other at hospital-owned Auburn Diagnostic Imaging, which is located a short distance away in Auburn. In 2007, the program went to all digital mammography, and, in the past year, when a local program stopped performing screening mammograms, the volume of patients doubled. To date, patient response to the Breast Health Navigator services has been positive, Alsobrook said, noting that the program "would like to expand our services."

In the past two years, the Cancer Center has also developed a special program called the Prostate Fund for Underserved Men, funded by the hospital's foundation. The Cancer Center has also partnered with

the McRae Prostate Foundation in Tuskegee. The aim of the program is to help improve access to prostate cancer screening for underserved men living in rural areas. Since March 2007, the program has screened 142 men, 11 of whom were found to have high PSAs. Five of those 11 men were diagnosed with cancer; one of those five was diagnosed with both prostate and colon cancer.

Social workers at the Cancer Center are deeply involved in helping patients who do not have insurance or who are underinsured access care. "We do not turn anybody away at this facility because they do not have insurance," said Kroll. The social workers also help patients access drug replacement programs for chemotherapy medications and with other patient assistance programs designed to help eligible patients meet practical expenses related to cancer treatment as well as the costs of supportive services. For example, because many Cancer Center patients live in rural areas, transportation can be a barrier to care. The social workers help patients connect with organizations such as the local chapter of the American Cancer Society to secure transportation services for those in need. The program is also able to apply for hospital foundation funds to help eligible patients cover gas expenses for their travel to receive cancer treatment. Not only do the social workers tend to the financial needs of the patient, they also facilitate support groups and provide emotional support.

## Providing the Full Continuum of Care

Patients at the Cancer Center have access to a range of supportive care services including occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy, lymphedema therapy, and nutritional counseling from the program's part-time dietitian.

In 2000, EAMC opened the first freestanding inpatient hospice program in the state. Bethany House is located in Auburn, about a 15-minute drive from the hospital's main campus. "This is an important aspect of the continuum of care for us," said Chelsea Kroll. "For our patients who come to us in crisis and who cannot go home, Bethany House is a wonderful option for them." 