



Take the Fight

College students serve as lay navigators, dedicated to a single patient's journey through cancer

BY DAVID WARREN AND MARCY POLETTI, RN, MSN

In November 2012 non-profit TakeTheFight launched a program to train and pair leading college students one-on-one with cancer patients. These students serve as lay navigators, helping patients and families fight more efficiently and effectively, and make more informed decisions. In its first partnership, TakeTheFight selected the Comprehensive Cancer Center at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center Winston-Salem, N.C., as its inaugural site. The founders', a father-son team, initial experience with Wake Forest Baptist was for treatment of the father's glioblastoma. During that time they established a strong relationship with their forward-thinking medical team, who encouraged patients to be at the center of their care.

What Teach for America is achieving for the education system, TakeTheFight aims to accomplish for the healthcare system. In the winter of 2012, TakeTheFight hand-selected a corps of Wake Forest University's top undergraduate students, each of whom committed to fight alongside a cancer patient and their family for the duration of the semester. Their mission was to provide unparalleled, individual support to assist patients in navigating the cancer ecosystem of complex medical information and terminology, office visits, medical records, and resources.

Bayard Powell, MD, section chief for Hematology and Oncology, describes TakeTheFight as, "Taking some very energetic, talented young folks and partnering them with patients who can benefit from some help. I see it largely as helping empower the patient to be a



partner with us [providers]."

To become a "cancer strategist," students are trained through a collaborative approach of TakeTheFight's unique organizational system and instruction by the Comprehensive Cancer Center's key department heads, including oncologists, patient and nurse navigators, chaplains, patient transportation staff, nutritionists, cancer program administrators, and others. Students also read assigned patient-centric cancer strategy books, written by physicians and survivors. Students are on-boarded via

the Comprehensive Cancer Center's Volunteer Services, which entails additional training, including HIPAA instruction.

In its inaugural semester, oncologists, nurses, and patient navigators began referring patients to TakeTheFight, which in turn paired student strategists one-on-one with motivated patients. TakeTheFight's patient population is purposefully diverse, ranging from all walks of life and various diagnoses of breast, brain, pancreatic, liver, melanoma, and leukemia cancers, to additional comorbidities such as HIV,

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diabetes, and sickle cell. Beginning this fall, patients will request their own strategist by reviewing strategist video introductions and résumés online in order to streamline the referral process.

Once students and patients are paired, patients must sign releases and HIPAA authorizations so strategists can access medical records to be able to understand and discuss each patient's case with the medical team, the patient, and family, as well as other TakeTheFight strategists. Students assist patients as "adopted family members," organizing their records and working collaboratively within TakeTheFight's online system to develop and track patient medical histories, medication forms, and pre-visit forms prior to medical visits.

Strategists call, text, and email patients multiple times a day; some have even gone out-of-state to visit their patient and caregivers at home and slept in hospital rooms, allowing caregivers to leave the hospital to rest in their own bed so they return refreshed the next day. When class schedules allow, strategists join the patient during physician visits to help patients absorb and understand physician instructions, as well as sharing with physicians details the patient might be unable to describe or recall.

Program goals are simple:

- Maximize each patient's limited time with his or her medical team
- Ensure patients adhere to the treatment strategies
- Direct patients to appropriate resources within the cancer program
- Utilize the energy of youth to give patients an intangible boost of support.


"It not only helps your patients, it also helps the students," remarks Kerry Snyder-Husted, RT, RIT, MBA, administrative director of the oncology service line. "And in a time where fewer students are going into healthcare, it's a fabulous opportunity to give students an exposure to what it's like to work with patients."



With the upcoming projected shortage of 4,000 oncologists—15 million visits unaccounted for—over the next several years, according to the ASCO Workforce Committee, the timing couldn't be more important in improving the oncology workforce deficit. "I think that [student exposure] can really be helpful for us and where we're heading in our future in healthcare," Snyder-Husted reiterated.

Boasting 100 percent patient satisfaction, TakeTheFight continues to expand its flagship chapter at the Comprehensive Cancer Center at Wake Forest Baptist. And its leadership is in active discussion with

other NCI-designated cancer centers to select additional launch sites.

TakeTheFight is headquartered in Bethesda, Md., and can be found online at www.takethefight.org, on Facebook at facebook.com/takethefight, or by emailing connect@takethefight.org. It's not a charity—it's an army. And no one fights alone. 

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