

spotlight

Hematology-Oncology Associates of the Treasure Coast Port St. Lucie, Florida



For more than 30 years, Hematology-Oncology Associates of the Treasure Coast has provided medical oncology services to Port St. Lucie and surrounding counties in southern Florida. The physician group specializes in hematology and oncology, and includes three additional satellite locations to the Port St. Lucie office. The practice has 92 employees and 5 hematologist-oncologists across all locations.

“We are first and foremost a medical practice focused on patient health, safety, and quality of life. Our practice has been here for 30 plus years,” said Christine Gerdes, RN, BSN, OCN, CCRP, research director for Hematology-Oncology Associates of the Treasure Coast.

Serving the Community

Practice physicians also participate in local cancer lectures to the community and serve on tumor boards at several of the area hospitals. Patients requiring radiation oncology services or any other service are referred to local hospitals or other specialty groups. These referrals are usually based on where the patient lives.

“When patients are diagnosed with cancer, they are devastated emotionally and financially making it difficult to travel even to surrounding counties for treatment. Therefore we try to refer to the closest facility in proximity to their home. Some centers offer transportation services to assist patients with traveling to their appointments,” said Gerdes.

The practice offers a “one-stop-shop” for its medical oncology patients. On-site services include:

- Infusion Suites (available at all four offices with recliners and TV access)
- Laboratory
- Imaging (PET/CT)
- Financial counseling
- Oral dispensing for medications
- Research program with clinical trials.

The convenience of an in-house oral dispensary is greatly appreciated by patients. “Our patients are able to get a lot of their oral medications right here while they’re in the office. They like the benefit of not having to make an additional stop to take their script down to the local pharmacy to wait,” said Gerdes.

Financial Counseling

“Patients tell me about the different obstacles they endure when they’re first learning that they have cancer and a big question is usually: ‘What do I do next?’” said Gerdes.

The financial burden of cancer can take a toll on many patients. To help patients through the insurance process and possibly locate foundations for assistance, Hematology-Oncology Associates of the Treasure Coast employs full-time financial counselors in each office and one patient assistance coordinator.

These staff members take on the task of navigating the complex world of insurance and financial assistance—something that is often daunting to newly-diagnosed cancer patients. Financial counselors will reach out to pharmaceutical companies to find out whether they offer co-pay assistance or other financial programs and guide patients through the application

process. Financial counselors can also help uninsured patients select insurance plans or enroll in Medicaid or other assistance programs.

Department of Clinical Research

Hematology-Oncology Associates of the Treasure Coast began conducting clinical cancer research in the late 1990s. The clinical research program evolved from a pre-existing outpatient stem cell transplant program with an outside company.

“I came here as a stem cell transplant nurse, and we performed stem cell transplants on an outpatient basis. Unfortunately the outcome of the stem cell transplant results limited the types of cancers that could be treated therefore the unit was disbanded. But before the transplant unit was dissolved, we had already started participating in standard dose studies in our practice so we closed the transplant unit on Friday and continued with our own research division on Monday,” said Gerdes.

The Department of Clinical Research, which started in 2001 with three studies, has since expanded to more than 25 ongoing studies, including Phase I trials. Practice physicians alternate the role of principal investigators (PIs), taking on the responsibility of reporting to the FDA, the trial sponsor, or the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Practice physicians also participate as sub-investigators on all other studies.

Department staff includes three dedicated research nurses, three clinical RNs to perform all in-office drug administration, four study coordinators, three

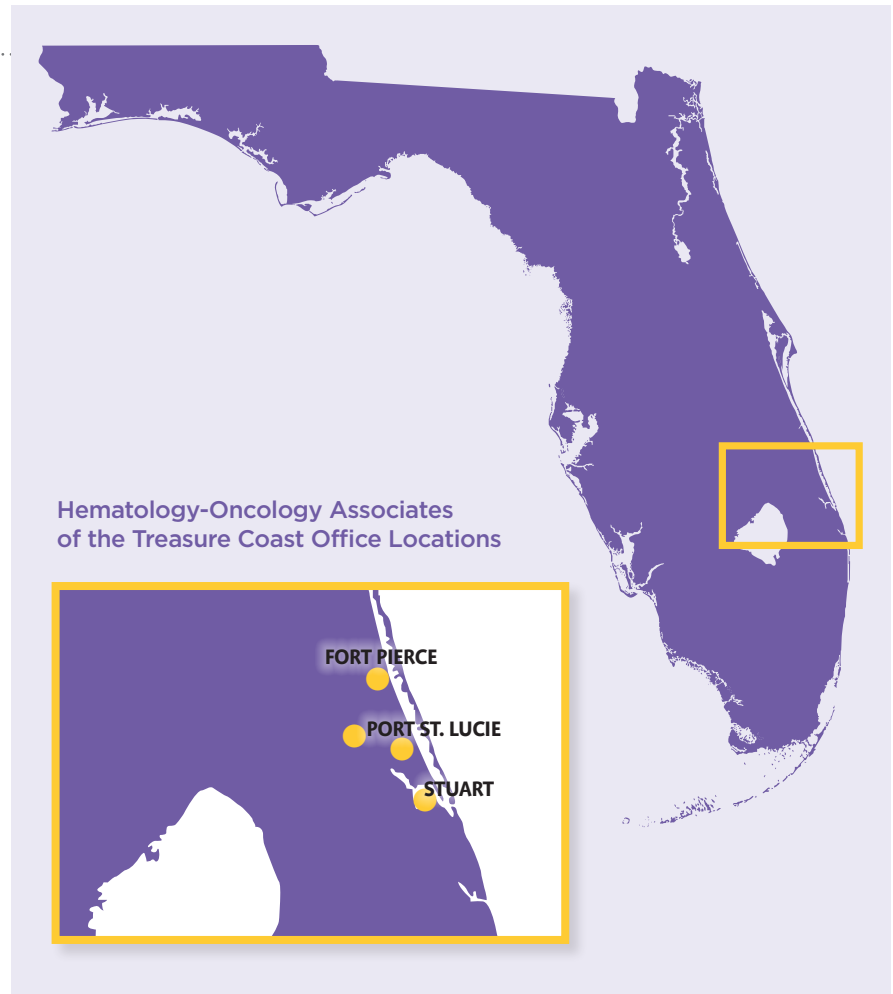
dedicated medical assistants, and a financial administrator.

Physicians are the first line of contact for recruiting patients to clinical trials. The Department of Clinical Research holds weekly meetings with practice physicians and staff regarding enrolling trials to discuss potential patients, and specific inclusion and exclusion criteria for these studies. This keeps research at the forefront of providers' minds when seeing newly-diagnosed patients.

If a trial is available and the patient agrees, the physician submits the patient's name to the research department to perform a medical history evaluation and chart review. Patients then meet with their physician and Gerdes to go through the consenting process and ensure the patients understand their rights and what trial participation will entail.

Offering clinical trials on-site eases the travel burden for the practice's patients and provides access to new, innovative treatments for patients. "The doctors have put a lot of time and effort in to making sure their patients have this opportunity locally, since many cannot afford to travel far or leave their support system for treatment. Our site is located only 10 to 12 miles from each of our satellite offices," said Gerdes.

Gerdes has also noticed the significant impact clinical trial offerings have had on their patients with locally advanced disease or stage IV. "They may run out of treatment options so clinical trials have played a big role in their lives. Quality of life is also very important to us and our patients as well as sponsors who develop the drug. We have patients who still work during their




treatment on clinical trials with good quality of life."

Gerdes and colleagues have seen the evolution of cancer treatment and how important clinical trials are in the development of new therapies over the past 20 years. No longer considered the last option available to patients, qualified patients may now access state-of-the-art treatments via clinical trials earlier in their disease progress, which hopefully results in a better response without the debilitating side effects that can prevent activities of daily living or good quality of life.

Hematology-Oncology Associates of the Treasure Coast has made their Department of Clinical Research a cornerstone of their care as they believe it benefits their patients, as well as the future treatment of cancer.

The department is currently studying immunotherapies, both alone and in combination with chemotherapy. "The

more patients who participate in clinical trials, the better chance on finding a cure," said Gerdes. 

Select Support Services:

- Financial counseling
- *Look Good, Feel Better*
- Support groups
- Physician dispensing of oral medications

Number of new analytic cases in 2014: 1,600