

spotlight

Central Peninsula Oncology Soldotna, Alaska



Delivering quality cancer care to patients in their home community is the driving force behind Central Peninsula Oncology, a hospital-owned outpatient oncology clinic on the Kenai Peninsula in Alaska. Access to care in this community is often at the mercy of the weather.

The Kenai Peninsula protrudes from Alaska's south-central coast, just north of Kodiak Island. A single highway connects each town on the peninsula and stretches 150 miles through the Chugach Mountains from Soldotna to Anchorage, the nearest city. Winter months can bring travel to a standstill due to freezing temperatures and heavy blizzard conditions that can ground local flights for days and close the main highway. Though summer months offer respite, outbreaks of wildfires can threaten travelers and shut down access to roadways.

For patients with cancer and their families, the opening of Central Peninsula Oncology in 2017 has brought cancer services together in one location within Central Peninsula Hospital. Today, more than 95 percent of the area's patients with cancer receive care locally, with only about 5 percent needing referrals to Seattle, Wash., or other facilities in the "lower 49" for uncommon cancers or second opinions.

From the Ground Up

Located in the medical office building attached to the main hospital, Central Peninsula Oncology covers 5,620 square feet. Built in 2016, the outpatient clinic includes two procedure rooms and a 10-chair infusion center designed following the Planetree

patient-centric, healing environment guidelines. Spacious windows supply natural light throughout and offer breathtaking views of the Kenai Mountains. The infusion chairs are arranged so that patients can enjoy Alaska's natural wonders while receiving treatment, and small dividing screens create a sense of privacy.

"[We want patients to] be comfortable during the little bit of time they have to spend with us," explains Shayne Pond, oncology/infusion director. The significantly larger infusion center allows for more space for patients but is still visible from the nurses' stations.

Though patients and staff benefit from the open space layout, initially it created an unforeseen challenge as staff adapted to covering more distance and providing care to a greater volume of patients in a larger area. However, the team responded quickly, establishing their own process and workflows to make effective use of the new space. The infusion center provides both oncology and non-oncology treatments to outpatients, including chemotherapy, blood transfusions, platelet transfusions, intravenous antibiotics, and hydration and electrolyte replacement. These services are individualized to meet the needs of each patient and his or her family.

Plans for launching an outpatient oncology clinic at Central Peninsula Hospital included recruiting a medical oncologist to lead the practice. Darren Mullins, MD, was brought on board in

2017. At the time, Central Peninsula Hospital had an infusion center, which administered oncology and non-oncology infusions, but there was no full-time medical oncologist on staff. With the help of the experienced infusion staff already on board and administration, Central Peninsula Oncology has grown to accommodate about 400 patients annually. To meet increasing patient demands, a satellite location has opened in Homer, Alaska, which provides care for patients farther south on the peninsula.

The community includes a small, independent oncology practice located across the street from the hospital; however,





the patients have access to radiation treatment modalities, including external beam therapy, intensity-modulated radiation therapy, stereotactic body radiation therapy, and image-guided radiation therapy. Central Peninsula Oncology collaborates closely with these providers to facilitate the co-management of care in more challenging cases.

As patient volumes have increased, so have scheduled multidisciplinary tumor board meetings, which are now held weekly. Ad hoc breast cancer tumor boards are as needed. These conferences usually bring together medical oncologists, radiation oncologists,

general surgeons, radiologists, pathologists, and other surgical subspecialists for prospective patient case discussion. Patients' primary care physicians are also invited to attend.

A Spot for Snowbirds


The picturesque Kenai Peninsula, also known as "Alaska's playground," is a popular tourist destination. Spacious views, scenic drives, and opportunities for land and sea adventure bring visitors as well as vacationers with second homes in the area. Central Peninsula Oncology provides care for visiting patients with cancer or patients who are temporary residents during the summer months, so care coordination for these individuals is imperative.

Communication is key, shared Shayne Pond. Central Peninsula Oncology takes pride in its ability to care for these patients by facilitating the sharing of records and treatment plans between its own staff and the patient's provider at home.

Going Forward

As Central Peninsula Oncology continues to expand to meet patient demand, there is ongoing discussion on how to improve services and advance the delivery of quality cancer care to the community. Future goals include developing a formal affiliation with one or more tertiary cancer centers in Washington state, notably in Seattle. This next step will help Central Peninsula Oncology build a seamless referral network for patients with rare cancers and bring access to clinical trials to patients close to home. These formal affiliations will also allow the practice to broaden participation and resources for its tumor boards and possibly create opportunities to benefit from telemedicine to engage with more providers and access more resources.

Also on the horizon, the state of Alaska is looking to develop a program for all patient navigators throughout the state. This program will give navigators the opportunity to meet, share resources, and develop relationships to help cancer patients across the state. Going forward, Central Peninsula Oncology hopes that this program will widen the scope of resources available for local patients.

Achieving these goals will allow Central Peninsula Oncology to deliver more comprehensive cancer care to the Kenai Peninsula, while staying true to its mission to support patient access to quality cancer care close to home and family. 

Select Supportive Care Services

- Access to American Cancer Society lay navigators
- Nutrition services
- Survivorship services

Approximate number of new analytic cases seen in 2018: 249

the practice has limited office hours. Therefore, providing full-time cancer care to the 35,000-count community falls mainly on Dr. Mullins and the team at Central Peninsula Oncology.

As with other smaller oncology practices, staff members—clinical and non-clinical—take on multiple roles to provide the best multidisciplinary care they can. The practice is staffed with a medical oncologist, an oncology-certified nurse, seven chemotherapy-trained registered nurses, and an in-house lay navigator. The hospital's social workers are available to clinic patients if needed.

In order to provide comprehensive patient care, Central Peninsula Oncology has established working relationships with other oncology specialists, including a radiation oncology practice in Anchorage. Through an arrangement with the Anchorage group, radiation oncology services are provided at the Central Peninsula Hospital. Under the direction of a full-time radiation oncologist,