

spotlight

Cancer Centers of Colorado at SCL Health St. Mary's Grand Junction, Colorado



Serving a catchment area of more than 150 miles, the Cancer Centers of Colorado at SCL Health St. Mary's is a hospital-based community cancer center located just west of the Rocky Mountains in Grand Junction, Colo. Its 16-year-old building sits across the street from the SCL Health St. Mary's Hospital in an outpatient pavilion. Through a suite of multidisciplinary cancer care services, the Cancer Centers of Colorado at SCL Health St. Mary's provides high-quality cancer care under one roof to its rural population. St. Mary's is the only cancer center in the region with dual accreditations—one from the Commission on Cancer as a designated community cancer center and another from the American Society of Radiation Oncology.

The SCL Health St. Mary's location serves as the main site for cancer care for the Cancer Centers of Colorado in the western region of the state. Through partnerships with other community and critical access hospitals in the region, St. Mary's also provides care at three outreach clinics and offers radiation oncology services at a second location. At the main location, the cancer center offers medical, radiation, and surgical oncology services, as well as a variety of supportive care services. Its clinical and non-clinical staff are employed by SCL Health St. Mary's Hospital.

"We try to be as much of a one-stop shop for our patients as possible," says Kevin Dryanski, director of the oncology service line at the Cancer Centers of Colorado at SCL Health St. Mary's. "We know that many of our patients travel an hour or more to get to

us, and we want to limit the number of places they have to visit to receive the high-quality care that we provide."

St. Mary's provides outpatient oncology services on the first floor of the cancer center. Medical oncology is staffed by four medical oncologists, three advanced practice providers, six nurse navigators, and five medical assistants. The medical oncology clinic is set up in a pod-style structure, where each medical oncologist has their own pod made up of one provider office, a medical assistant and nurse navigator station, and three exam rooms. Each pod is staffed by one medical oncologist or nurse practitioner, one medical assistant, and one nurse navigator.

A 25-chair infusion suite located on the same floor provides oncology and non-oncology infusions for SCL Health St. Mary's Hospital. The infusion suite employs a staff of 14 oncology-trained or certified nurses and two medical assistants, and the clinic sees approximately 40 to 50 patients a day. Many infusion chairs face a long wall of windows through which patients can view trees, foliage, and the Colorado National Monument during treatment. Patients also have the option of receiving treatment outside on a patio when weather permits. The oncology pharmacy—staffed by three oncology certified pharmacists and two pharmacy technicians—is down a hallway from the medical oncology clinic.

As its accreditations suggest, St. Mary's provides a suite of high-quality radiation oncology services, including IGRT, VMAT, SABR, SRS, and HDR, via two TrueBeam linear

accelerators. Its radiation oncology department is staffed by three radiation oncologists, three physicists, two dosimetrists, and seven radiation therapists. The cancer center also provides gynecologic surgical oncology services in the hospital through a partnership with the University of Colorado physicians group. Other surgical oncology services are performed by the SCL Health St. Mary's employed cardiovascular thoracic surgery group or local independent general surgery and other subspecialty groups, which are both closely aligned with St. Mary's providers.

Treating Patients Close to Home

St. Mary's partners with the Radiation Oncology Physician Group and Montrose Memorial Hospital to provide full-service radiation oncology treatments in Montrose, Colo., via one TrueBeam linear accelerator. It operates two medical oncology outreach clinics in the state: an in-person clinic in Rifle, Colo., and a telehealth-based clinic in Craig, Colo. The Craig location is run in partnership with Memorial Regional Health, a critical access hospital, as St. Mary's medical oncologists and nurse practitioners conduct remote visits with patients through telehealth in the presence of the partner hospital's infusion nursing staff. St. Mary's staff in Grand Junction alternate telehealth coverage at this location. Staff then travel to the Rifle location once a month to run a full-day clinic. A third outreach clinic in Moab, Utah, offers in-person clinics once a month and telehealth services once per month from staff in Grand Junction. Each of

these locations offer patients infusions, follow-up care, and oncology pharmacy services, while its partner hospitals provide infusion nursing staff, clinic staff, and onsite pharmacy staff.

“The purpose of the three outreach clinics and second radiation oncology location is really to increase access to specialized care and to limit additional need for patients to drive, anywhere from an additional two to four hours, to get to Grand Junction to receive care,” explains Dryanski.

Care Coordination is Essential

Staff at the Cancer Centers of Colorado at SCL Health St. Mary’s take pride in their care coordination model, which begins with the new patient nurse navigator at the start of a patient’s referral. At this first meeting, the new patient nurse navigator answers the technical and sensitive questions patients may have prior to their multidisciplinary consult.

“It was a big push of ours a few years ago to ensure that we had not just a clinical person but a highly trained clinical person who would be the first voice patients would hear when they received a notice that they needed to be referred to an oncologist,” says Dryanski. The new patient nurse navigator walks patients through the initial consult process to ensure that patients have all of the information they need to be prepared for their consult and works closely with oncologists to ensure that providers have everything they need to have a meaningful consult.

After the initial consult, patients are introduced to their oncology nurse navigator, who supports them throughout treatment and into survivorship. When patients and their oncologists determine a plan of treatment, the oncology nurse navigator follows up with patients to go through a teaching session where they can answer any questions patients and their families might have about treatment. Oncology nurse navigators then outline a treatment

schedule, so patients know what to expect at the start and after their treatment course. At St. Mary’s, the new patient nurse navigator and oncology nurse navigators are key members of the cancer care team who provide support to patients and ensure continuity of care.

The cancer center also offers social work, nutrition, financial counseling, spiritual and chaplaincy services, and genetic counseling. All supportive care services are provided on-site and are free to patients. Patients can also participate in support groups that are now remote due to COVID-19, and St. Mary’s hopes to bring back massage therapy, yoga, and art therapy once it is safe to do so.

Treating Patients in the Rockies

As a regional community cancer center west of the Rocky Mountains, St. Mary’s sees a large percentage of patients who are veterans—about 5 to 10 percent of its entire patient population. With this patient population comes certain challenges, such as coordinating care between the cancer center and the local Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital. To better support these patients, St. Mary’s is enhancing the communication with its local VA hospital to improve coordination of care and the patient experience.

Due to the many mines spread out across western Colorado, the cancer center also sees a higher prevalence of lung cancer, especially diagnosis at late-stage disease. Dryanski likens these rates to the rural area St. Mary’s services, which impacts patients’ access to care and health education. To address these needs, the cancer center educates its community through monthly interviews with television stations across its catchment area, providing education on all types of cancer. It also offers lung cancer screening via low-dose computed tomography that is available to its entire community.

“It’s a robust program that we’ve been doing for the last several years, which has led to decreases in our percentage of total advanced lung cancer,” says Dryanski.

Improving Access to Clinical Trials

The Cancer Centers of Colorado at SCL Health St. Mary’s also offers its patients the opportunity to participate in state-of-the-art clinical trials that fit their diagnostic, health, and treatment history. Its Clinical Research Team employs a director, two research nurses, a research pharmacist, a research coordinator, a financial coordinator, a data coordinator, and a regulatory administrator. The team collaborates with the cancer care team to identify potential clinical trials for patients and coordinates care for patients who choose to enroll in a clinical trial. Its research program also recently joined the SWOG Cancer Research Network, a global cancer research community funded by the National Cancer Institute (NCI). Through this network, St. Mary’s offers patients access to 36 NCI-sponsored Phase II and Phase III clinical trials, currently open to accrual. In 2020 St. Mary’s accrued 156 patients to clinical trials—approximately 17 percent of the total number of new patients seen at the cancer center.

To improve patient care at the pace St. Mary’s has seen, Dryanski takes pride in cancer center leadership’s ability to listen to its front-line staff members and enact change when needed, while also ensuring that all staff are engaged in continuous improvement efforts.

“St. Mary’s ability to engage everyone to enact improvement and change certainly accelerates the rate at which we can improve what we do and how we do it,” he says. “But the thing that really defines us is our people. We have staff and providers who genuinely care about helping others. We care about people first and foremost and that is central to everything we do.” The Cancer Centers of Colorado at SCL Health St. Mary’s brings high-quality cancer care to its rural community by quickly adapting to the needs of its patients as cancer care continues to advance at a rapid pace, putting them at a competing level with large academic cancer centers. 