

spotlight

The Commonwealth Healthcare Corporation, Oncology Center



Saipan, the largest island and capital of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, is home to the Commonwealth Healthcare Corporation, Oncology Center. The center is a specialty clinic under Commonwealth Healthcare Corporation—the main health system within the islands, which includes the sole hospital in the territory, primary clinics for all ages, specialty care clinics, the state public health department, behavioral health, and primary care clinics. Founded in May 2019, it is the first and only cancer center in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. “Prior to that, there was no regular cancer care in this territory,” said Peter Brett, MD, medical oncologist at the Oncology Center. “Patients with cancer who could not travel off-island would simply die from their untreated disease.”

According to Dr. Brett, patients who were able to travel the long distances to receive cancer care would go to the Republic of the Philippines, Guam, Hawaii, or the US mainland. As these patients often needed ongoing treatment, they—along with their family and friends—would often remain at these sites for months or years and are sometimes never able to return home. “Since we established our oncology center, most patients with cancer can now stay in the Northern Mariana Islands and receive culturally sensitive care locally, with their local support systems, and continue with their jobs,” he said. “Often patients say that having a cancer center [here] is a blessing.”

Delivering Hope and Cancer Care

Commonwealth Healthcare Corporation’s CEO Esther L. Muña, PhD, MHA, FACHE, echoes the sentiments of these patients. She takes great pride in being able to deliver accessible care to

the nearly 50,000 people that live on the islands—a population she describes as largely medically underserved—in part due to the effort required to open the Oncology Center. “The reason we just started the program in 2019 is because for the longest time, we have not had an oncologist willing to come here,” she explained. “One was finally interested, moved here, and is still here.”

Dr. Brett is the Oncology Center’s sole board-certified medical oncologist and is part of a staff comprising 3 oncology nurse practitioners, 1 palliative care nurse practitioner, 3 registered oncology nurses, 2 certified nursing assistants, and 1 financial counselor. “We have enough providers and support staff so that patients can be seen on a regular basis without delays,” Dr. Muña said. “All new patients with cancer, likely cancer, or complex hematologic problems can be seen within a day of referral.”

Dr. Muña believes this quick turnaround time has allowed patients to be diagnosed at earlier stages. “We are helping a lot more people recover and stay alive,” she said. This patient-centered drive is epitomized by the cancer center’s mission to ensure every patient receives care, regardless of insurance coverage. “Most patients have local Medicaid, but a substantial number have no health insurance at all and very limited financial resources,” Dr. Muña shared. “For expensive cancer medications, we work with patient assistance programs to try and obtain them at low-to-no-cost for our patients. We also have an organized cancer screening and prevention program available at low-to-no-cost to all island residents.” However, Dr. Muña admits that the Oncology Center has encountered significant care delivery challenges.





Challenges Amidst Triumph

"In the past we have faced shipping issues for medication, because we are so far away," Dr. Muña said. "Some of the contracted pharmacies that the manufacturers work with have not heard of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, so they don't have it in their drop-down list for a shipping location." According to Dr. Muña, the cost of operating the Oncology Center has undergone significant increases since opening. "We opened and saw about 50 patients a month; now it is about 300 patients a month," she said.

There are also cultural practices that continue to influence the occurrence of certain types of cancer on the island. "A lot of our patients are diagnosed with oral cancer because there is a palm nut that is chewed on the island," Dr. Muña shared. "It is something that has been passed on, and our people have been doing it for many years. It is one of the most common diagnoses we have."

According to Dr. Muña most of these challenges are slowly being resolved. "The [pharmaceutical] manufacturers are learning about us and have already or are in the process of adding us as a shipping location," she said. "We are also educating people about the effects their habits could have on their overall health."

Scope of Care

The Oncology Center has satellite clinics on Rota and Tinian, small islands that complete the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. "Our staff flies there by tiny plane over

the Pacific [Ocean] for monthly satellite clinics," Dr. Brett revealed. "These sites are mainly to see new patient consults and established patients for evaluation. If patients there need treatment, we usually have them fly to Saipan for care."

The Oncology Center offers patients chemotherapy, immunotherapy, and targeted oral treatments. They also evaluate patients with hematologic benign and malignant diseases. However, the center does not offer radiation treatment and patients who require this modality are referred off-island for care. "We do not provide complex cancer surgery, but we offer some services like port-a-cath insertion, hemicolectomy for colon cancer, and breast surgery with sentinel node biopsy," Dr. Brett said. "We also cannot offer CAR T-cell treatment or stem cell transplant."

The central nursing station in the Oncology Center is surrounded by 8 infusion suites. "Each suite has 1 infusion chair or bed, and all patients can bring family and friends as they receive treatment. We have chairs in the suites and food is provided," Dr. Brett said. For patients with cancer in need of support services, the Commonwealth Cancer Association provides subsidized nutrition supplements and medical equipment not covered by insurance, as well as access to support groups. At the Oncology Center, patients have access to a dedicated palliative care service and a free scalp cooling system to prevent hair loss during treatment. "The services the Association offers are free to all residents, but they need referral from our center," Dr. Brett said.

According to Dr. Brett, the Commonwealth Healthcare Corporation Hospital has a central inpatient and outpatient pharmacy, staffed with pharmacists and pharmacy technicians familiar with oncology pharmacy. "The pharmacy purchases cancer drugs, mixes drugs, and provides pump services," he said. "Oncology providers meet daily for a huddle with pharmacy staff to review the next day's patients' treatments."

Dr. Muña is proud of this collaboration as it reflects the broader impact of the Oncology Center on the islands. "For cancer care to be effective, it has to be culturally sensitive and that is what we are providing," she said. By offering this kind of care and ensuring that patients can remain close to their support systems, the Oncology Center has transformed the cancer care landscape in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. 