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## Columbia St. Mark's Hospital Salt Lake City, Utah

### Building a Cancer Support Center

In 1996 Columbia St. Mark's Hospital in Salt Lake City, Utah, established the Cancer Support Center, a dedicated resource center for newly diagnosed cancer patients and their families. The Center was created to directly link these patients to the team of physicians and other clinical and supportive care staff involved in their treatment. The Center is staffed by an oncology clinical nurse, Carol Lee, C.N.S., O.C.N., who is the patient's primary contact for information about the treatment process and supportive care options.

The Center strives to improve quality of life for patients through an "education and support intervention" that reinforces learning for the patient, according to Lee. The key is having a dedicated person responsible for responding to the patient.

"Previously we found that if patients didn't know who to call about a problem, they didn't call anyone until the problem was severe and required crisis intervention," said Lee. "Patients know that they can call the Cancer Support Center and get their problem handled within a matter of hours."

By reaching patients earlier, Lee hopes to resolve patients' problems before they escalate to a crisis level. Lee's goal is to reduce the number of oncology patients needing crisis management interventions such as emergency room visits or inpatient admissions. In these cases, the typical patient has misunderstood the directions for taking the medication or has mistaken complications for normal side effects. When the pain becomes severe, the patient enters the emergency room. Emergency room staff, while able to relieve patients' immediate symptoms, are limited in the amount of one-on-

one counseling and education they can provide to help patients to take their medication effectively or to recognize their symptoms earlier, Lee said.

Lee is working with emergency room and other hospital staff to recognize oncology patients in need of specific education. When oncology patients do enter the emergency unit, emergency room staff will call the Cancer Support Center for consultation with Lee, who either comes to the emergency unit to review the patient's problem or instructs the staff about the needs of that particular patient. As the Center becomes more well known in the community, oncology patients in crisis will be referred to the Cancer Support Center sooner, and thus be treated more effectively in appropriate settings.

Newly diagnosed cancer patients are referred by their physicians to the Cancer Support Center. Lee performs a holistic assessment of each patient's psychosocial needs, evaluating his or her nutritional status, pain and stress levels, and existing support systems. Physicians provide Lee with a check sheet for each patient, which includes any issues that might have arisen during the patient's initial office visit, such as nutritional deficiency or pain issues. Lee uses this information to map out a plan of supportive care for the patient.

As patients undergo treatment, Lee is available to answer questions about the physiological and emotional effects of their care. Patients can dial the Cancer Support Center telephone number with concerns about medication schedules, treatment side effects, or support group sessions. When Lee is away from the center, telephone calls are automatically transferred to a pager that Lee carries at all times,

which allows her to respond quickly to patient calls. Questions that involve physician consultation are usually answered within two to three hours.

#### PROMOTING THE SERVICE

The Cancer Support Center is located in the same building where all other cancer services are provided. The central location places the Center in full view of patients and permits easy access.

Lee has developed a brochure and regularly places advertisements in the hospital bulletin and the local newspaper. Lee has also developed a monthly community lecture series to promote the Center.

Patient satisfaction with the Cancer Support Center will be measured using a quality of life scale yet to be determined. Patients will receive the assessment at their initial visit with their physician, then three months later and again in another six months. Lee plans to show that patients guided by the Center are more satisfied with and function better during their treatment.

Currently St. Mark's Hospital is covering all expenses and divisional costs for the Cancer Support Center. Lee expects that more dedicated grant-writing efforts will be needed as the program grows. Eventually Lee hopes that data collected on decreased emergency room visits and inpatient admissions will be used as a selling point to third-party payers. "We want to show that the Cancer Support Center is a value-added contribution to the entire package of care for patients in our program," Lee said.

The Columbia/HCA Health System is committed to promoting value-added services such as the Cancer Support Center to its

customers—physicians, employees, patients, and third-party payers. Columbia is embarking on a mission to designate representatives both locally and nationally to promote these services as part of its comprehensive care for oncology patients.

Bobbie Kale, vice president of network services for the Columbia Utah Division, describes this

effort as yet another educational arm of the cancer program. "Our representatives link individuals in the surrounding communities to appropriate, convenient services at Columbia hospitals in Utah and appropriate services with which we partner," Kale said. In addition, the representatives gather input from the community about needs that are not being met.

The fact that Columbia St. Mark's Hospital is located in a state with the largest frontier in the continental United States creates challenges in reaching patients. However, Kale said, "We are constantly reinventing strategies to ensure that all patients have access to the best education and quality care." ❏

*Founded in 1872, Columbia St. Mark's Hospital is the oldest hospital west of the Mississippi River. The hospital has been a part of the Columbia/HCA Health System since 1994. The 306-bed tertiary care facility offers cardiology, oncology, orthopedic, and women's health service lines. In 1988 the hospital developed its women's health services in Salt Lake*

*County. Columbia St. Mark's Hospital is accredited with commendation by JCAHO and the ACoS's Commission on Cancer. The hospital has been ranked 50th in HCIA's listing of Top 100 U.S. hospitals.*

#### **VITAL STATISTICS**

Total hospital bed size: 306  
Dedicated cancer unit beds: 10

New analytic cancer patients seen each year: 600  
Managed care penetration in the state: 21 percent

#### **PATIENT SUPPORT SERVICES**

- A community-wide breast screening clinic provides self-breast exam instruction by a registered nurse and mammograms to more than 800 women a month.
- Columbia Home Care Services includes Medicare nursing; home medical equipment; and physical, occupational, and speech therapy.
- Women's Health Services offers educational programs on breast cancer management, massage therapy, and other topics.
- Support groups, including bereavement, breast cancer, life transitions, and other sessions, are offered free of charge.

