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Creating a Regional Presence

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Creating a Regional Presence

Within the past ten years, South Jersey Hospital System (SJHS), located in Cumberland

County, N.J., has transformed the area's independent community hospitals into an integrated regional network delivering oncology services to a five-county region.

Previously the county's four primary cities (Elmer, Bridgeton, Millville, and Vineland), supported their own hospitals, some dating back 100 years, and most no more than ten miles apart. The merging of Millville and Bridgeton Hospitals in 1988, Elmer Hospital in 1995, and Newcomb Hospital in Vineland, planned for 1998, has signaled a new approach to caring for a primarily rural population in need of cancer services. "We have been moving away from a parochial mindset to one that is more regional in scope," explained SJHS Medical Director Joseph W. Fanelle, M.D.

The system's first priority has been to consolidate services and decrease the number of licensed beds. SJHS administration ultimately plans to close three hospital buildings, leaving the Elmer division open and constructing one large facility located in the population center of the county. The economics of this strategy are simple enough, according to Fanelle. "It's more economical for us to operate one new hospital than to operate three aging facilities." Determining the exact location of that new facility, however, is a much more complicated, politically sensitive issue. Even with the cities so close in proximity, "everyone wants [the new facility] in their backyard," Fanelle added.

Eliminating unnecessary duplication of effort is also a challenge. The South Jersey Regional Cancer

Center, located within the Millville division of SJHS, is the locus of the majority of cancer services, including medical, radiation, and surgical oncology. However, Elmer, Bridgeton, and Newcomb Hospitals also provide varying levels of oncology treatment, and all have active tumor boards. In fact, in any given month, a total of ten tumor boards takes place throughout the four locations. Fanelle concedes that ten tumor boards per month are too many for a program the size of SJHS.

Until consolidation culminates with construction of the new hospital facility, SJHS plans to reduce the number of tumor boards to six per month through video teleconferencing. Under the current setup, determining where to present a patient's case is more a logistical issue than a turf battle. For example, a patient's pathology report might be in one location, the X-rays in another, with the primary care physician at one hospital and the oncologists at another, according to Fanelle. Teleconferencing, which will be coordinated by the central South Jersey Regional Cancer Center, will enable tumor boards to be simulcast across multiple locations, thereby decreasing the number of conferences and administrative burden.

A FOX CHASE NETWORK AFFILIATE

Unlike many mergers of hospitals in neighboring communities, formation of the SJHS has not aligned former competitors. Within the greater South Jersey region, competition among community hospitals has never really existed, stated Melanie R. Pirolo, M.S., R.N., A.O.C.N., director of the South Jersey Regional Cancer Center. "In the past we didn't see people going

from one community hospital to another," she explained. "With the hospitals sharing the same medical staff, the issue of where to seek services had been more of a matter of convenience, depending on where a patient lived."

Instead, SJHS faced competition from the major academic centers to the north in Philadelphia, Pa., and surrounding areas, including three NCI-designated cancer centers, all within an hour-and-a-half radius. "Most patients do not want, or lack the financial resources, to travel to receive care," Pirolo said. "However, many will travel if they think it means getting the best possible care." Pirolo related a common scenario in which patients would receive their diagnoses at SJHS, then travel to Philadelphia for treatment and never return to the system.

In 1995, under the leadership of Robert Frelick, M.D., former medical director and presently a consultant with the SJHS cancer program, SJHS entered into an affiliation with Fox Chase Cancer Network in Philadelphia, Pa. The affiliation has allowed individuals in the SJHS region to access the expertise of Fox Chase Cancer Center. Such an arrangement facilitates communication between SJHS and consulting Fox Chase physicians. South Jersey Regional Cancer Center staff schedule appointments for patients with the appropriate disciplines in Philadelphia and package all the necessary reports, slides, and X-rays. Staff are then better able to track patients referred for second opinions.

Now a much more common scenario features patients returning to South Jersey for treatment. "When patients hear the same diagnosis or the same recommendation for a treatment plan from Fox

Chase physicians as from their physicians at SJHS, they have confidence in the caliber of our program," Fanelle said.

TAKING CARE OF ITS OWN

South Jersey Hospital System serves the small, primarily rural pocket of Cumberland and surrounding counties tucked between Philadelphia, Pa., and Atlantic City, N.J. The area leads the state in unemployment, high school dropout, and low birth weight rates, all indicators of an impoverished area. Local transportation is wanting. The area has a significantly high minority population, considering its distance from a major metropolitan area. These statistics attest to the area's great need for education, screening, and health maintenance in all aspects of health care, includ-

ing cancer screening, prevention, and treatment.

Through the Fox Chase Cancer Network, SJHS has been able to offer members of this community access to a wider scope of programs and services, including screening and prevention, clinical trials, pain management, and genetics counseling. Awarded as a site for RTOG in 1995, the affiliation allowed SJHS to expand its clinical trials' offering to include ECOG and NSABP trials. GOG affiliation is also planned.

Though relatively small in size, South Jersey Hospital System is making a substantial attempt to accrue minority populations to clinical trials. Despite diligent efforts to educate and recruit patients, strict eligibility requirements and an overall lack of interest on the part of patients can

make accrual sporadic. Months may go by with only one patient enrolled in a particular trial; then one week Fanelle will enroll another five patients. For Fanelle, every patient counts. Fanelle and Pirollo both agree that participation in clinical trials should be a priority for any program supporting an underserved population. (For more on South Jersey Hospital System and minority accrual to clinical trials, see "Minority Accrual in Rural America: An Interview with Staff at the South Jersey Hospital System," p. 28.)

In the future Fanelle hopes to take full advantage of all the Fox Chase Cancer Network has to offer the South Jersey region. Of one thing, he is certain. "Our programs and services will continue to reflect who we are." ☐

The South Jersey Hospital System (SJHS) traces its roots back to the original Bridgeton Hospital, which opened in 1898. More recently, mergers with Millville Hospital and Elmer Community Hospital have enabled SJHS to become the largest and most comprehensive health care network in Cumberland, Salem, and Cape May Counties. A member of the Fox Chase Cancer Network since 1995, SJHS offers patients a complete range of cancer services, including medical and radiation oncology and ancillary services, as well as access to the expertise available at the Fox Chase Cancer Center in Philadelphia, Pa. South Jersey Regional Cancer Center is the only institution serving patients from the surrounding five-county area that is approved by ACoS as a Community Hospital Comprehensive Cancer Center.

VITAL STATISTICS

- Total institutional bed size: 709
- Dedicated cancer unit beds: 72
- Number of analytic cancer patients seen each year: 970
- Managed care penetration in the state: 22 percent

PATIENT SUPPORT SERVICES

- Patient nutritional assessments are conducted by clinical nutritional staff soon after admission.
- Cancer prevention programs for breast and prostate cancer are tailored specifically for community groups and corporate education.
- Van service regionally transports patients more than twenty miles away in Cape May

Courthouse to SJHS and back for radiation therapy treatments.

- SJHS is the lead agency for a grant from the New Jersey State Department of Health for screening women for breast and cervical cancer. The program targets women older than age fifty of low income who are under- or uninsured.

