

Advancing Regional Care for Patients With Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia

Spotlight on University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center

Approximately 18740 new cases of chronic lymphocytic leukemia will be diagnosed in 2023¹—requiring multidisciplinary care to support treatment and long-term care that may not be accessible in community care settings. Academic medical centers can offer a distinct advantage for patients with chronic lymphocytic leukemia, however identifying these patients in underserved areas and bridging barriers to access remains a challenge.

In 2020, the Association of Community Cancer Centers (ACCC) set out to examine the incidence rates and geographic location of chronic lymphocytic leukemia diagnoses across the country in relation to regional access to institutions with specialization for treating chronic lymphocytic leukemia. Through the development of heat maps,² which revealed the areas in the US most in need of expertise, an opportunity emerged in 2022 to identify and understand specific state and regional challenges to

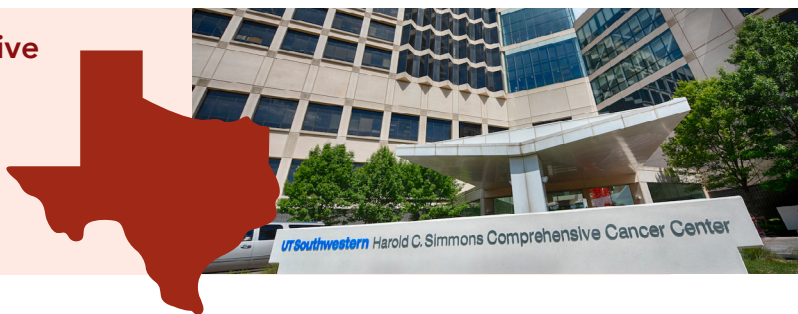
access, as well as identify solutions to provide equitable access to care for this patient population.

Through ACCC's education program, A Regional Approach to Advancing Care in Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia, with support by AstraZeneca, Janssen Oncology, and Pharmacyclics, ACCC explores how cancer programs are utilizing community outreach and other support strategies to improve care for underserved populations diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukemia. In this spotlight, ACCC shares this look at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center's Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center and its comprehensive approach to advancing care for patients with chronic lymphocytic leukemia.

Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center – University of Texas Southwestern

Location: Dallas, Texas

Center Type: Academic Medical Center



Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center

The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center (UT Southwestern) Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center is the only National Cancer Institute-designated comprehensive care center in Northern Texas and 1 of only 2 in the state. Located in the northwestern area of Dallas, Texas, UT Southwestern grew from a small, wartime facility into a nationally recognized medical center that supports 13 multidisciplinary clinical fields. The Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center is the only site in Texas

chosen for a national Cancer Moonshot clinical trial to find better treatments for acute myeloid leukemia, and is nationally recognized as a center of excellence for the treatment of myelodysplastic syndrome.

The robust Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia Program is part of the Lymphoid Malignancies Program, housed under the larger Malignant Hematology, Stem Cell Transplantation and Cellular Therapy program. Led by Farrukh Awan, MD,

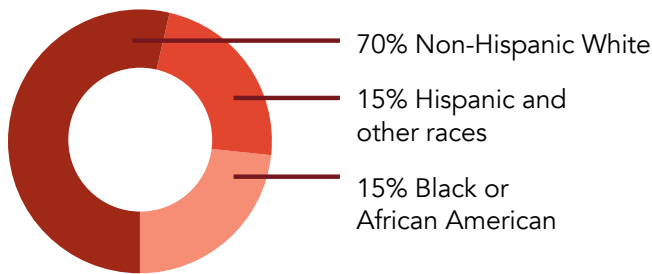
MS, professor of internal medicine and director of lymphoid malignancies, the leukemia program offers molecular therapies, immunotherapies, stem cell transplantation (the center offers the leading survival rate for adult allogeneic stem cell transplants in Texas), chemotherapies and radiation therapies, access to clinical trials, and hematopathologists, specialists trained to identify and classify blood cancers.

Patient Profile

The Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center sees approximately 130 to 150 new patients with chronic lymphocytic leukemia every year and monitors 900 patients under the program. Of these, 40% of patients are monitored without treatment and approximately 300 patients are currently on treatment or in the follow-up phase. Furthermore, approximately 200 patients are currently in remission follow-up.

UT Southwestern’s catchment area is vast—encompassing 16 counties and more than 7 million residents.³ According to the US Census Bureau statistics, by race and ethnicity, the catchment area includes approximately 54% Non-Hispanic White, 39% Hispanic/Latino, 21% African American, and 4% Asian.⁴

At the Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center, patient demographics are identified as approximately:



The median age of the population treated with chronic lymphocytic leukemia is **65 years old**

and the payer mix represents:

60% Medicare **40%** Private insurance

Addressing Regional Challenges

In Texas, cancer disparities are complex. Limited access to health care, shortages of primary care physicians and oncologists, limited to no insurance, persistent poverty, food insecurity, and other socioeconomic disparities place rural populations at higher risk of cancer, according to the National Cancer Institute.⁵ In urban areas of Texas, lack of transportation or inadequate transit systems impact patient access to care, and statewide, language and communication barriers impact minority populations, including the Hispanic population, who make up 26% of all Hispanics in the United States.⁶ Further, the significant population of undocumented patients creates an added layer of challenges with respect to insurance coverage and benefits, health literacy, language, patient-provider trust, and culturally competent care. National Cancer Institute (NCI) state cancer profiles report that 32.3% of Texans are uninsured, 10.7% of families are living below poverty, and 23.4% are living below 150% of poverty (higher than the national average of 8.9% and 20.7%, respectively).⁶ In addition, 7.6% of individuals above the age of 25 have less than a ninth-grade education level, nearly double the national average (4.8%) according to NCI state cancer profiles.⁷

To address these disparities, the Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center approaches patient support with the goal of addressing each patient’s individual needs to promote equity in care and reduce their cancer burden. The center provides an extensive array of patient directed resources, including nurse navigation, cancer psychology, social work, oncology nutrition, transitional care coordination, and other supportive services.

Patients are assessed for social determinants of health, health literacy (cognitive/intellectual impairments, language barriers, cultural differences), and are provided education on prognostic testing and types of treatment in plain language supplemented by printed literature and visuals to confirm understanding. Forms and literature are provided in English and Spanish, and translators are available for additional support.

Through the work of social workers and dietitians, the center identifies food insecurity needs and connects patients with home meal delivery services, food pantry programs, and oral supplements as needed. Social workers also source and provide grocery cards through internal donor funds, assist-

ing approximately 10 to 15 patients per month and about 200 patients a year.

To address the vast distances patients often travel to receive care at the center, the social work team works with local resources and a grant from American Cancer Society to assist identified patients with gas cards, Dallas Area Rapid Transportation (DART) coupons, and ride-hailing services, such as Lyft, when unforeseen circumstances arise. Transportation support and resources are provided to approximately 20 to 30 patients per month.

Partnerships and Programs

The Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center is very active at the local level as well as nationally through its Office of Community Outreach, Engagement, and Equity. The center hosts “listening sessions” (both live and virtual) with the Dallas-Fort Worth community to understand the community’s cancer needs and to promote engagement. Its Speakers Bureau platform features discussions with experts on cancer prevention, screening, and treatment. The center also connects with patients through its free patient support program, EMBRACE (Energy, Mind, Body, Relationships, Active Nutrition, Creative, and Expression) Survivorship, a platform for patients, families, and caregivers to learn more about topics related to cancer care and survivorship. The social work department offers additional support groups and an annual symposium (live and virtual) for patients and families adjusting to cancer diagnosis and related stressors. In addition to these initiatives, the center operates mobile cancer screenings and a cancer hotline to connect communities with cancer resources and free or low-cost services.

Beyond this, the Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center maintains strong partnerships with the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, CLL Society, American Cancer Society, and others, as well as participates in national events such as the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society’s annual Light the Night, the Lymphoma Research Foundation Annual Walk, and other conferences and events. Physician and clinical leaders regularly lecture and participate in peer-to-peer learning opportunities via webinars, educational programs, and publications to educate community-based providers on chronic lymphocytic leukemia care management and advancements in treatment.

Clinical Care Services for Underserved Populations

Beyond its psychosocial care programs and advocacy partnerships, the Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center supports patients from underserved communities through strong referral networks and clinical trials.

The center monitors and manages referrals through support groups, local community outreach in both the African American and Hispanic communities, and physician outreach efforts in target areas where resources and specialty care is limited. These referral networks are particularly important in supporting undocumented patients, as it can be challenging to find coverage and care for this population. Through its strong affiliation with Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas, Texas, a county-owned safety net hospital, the center can refer and, in some cases, receive and treat patients who may not otherwise be eligible for care.

This important outreach carries over to the center’s extensive involvement in clinical trials as well. The Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center maintains a comprehensive list of clinical trials and conducts weekly research meetings to assess patient eligibility and facilitate enrollment. For underserved or undocumented patients, clinical trials are available through Parkland as well as multiple satellite clinics across Fort Worth, Richardson, and the downtown Redbird areas, where patients can participate in trials onsite without traveling to the Simmons campus. Beyond this, the center provides ongoing patient outreach education to promote enrollment, particularly among underserved communities, as participation rates are typically lower in minority populations due to misinformation and general distrust. As Dr Awan explains, “Usually, minority communities have more of a distrust about clinical trials...the best way we found [to address this] is to develop a relationship with a patient built on trust...building relationships with patients throughout their whole journey, so that when it does come time to treat, most of them by and large are receptive to enrollment on a clinical trial. It is always our first priority to offer a clinical trial.”

Future Direction

With multiple programs and platforms in place and new initiatives underway to support the needs of its diverse communities and patient populations, the Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center continues to pave the path to greater access and quality care for patients in North Texas and beyond.

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The **Association of Community Cancer Centers (ACCC)** is the leading education and advocacy organization for the cancer care community. For more information, visit accc-cancer.org

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