

# Reframing the Conversation: Effective Practices for Diffuse Large B-Cell Lymphoma

## Spotlight on Virginia Oncology Associates

Diffuse large B-cell lymphoma (DLBCL) is the most common subtype of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. It accounts for 30% of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma cases in the United States and the incidence increases with age. This aggressive disease is quite treatable with chemotherapy; in many cases it can be cured in patients who achieve complete remission with first-line treatment.

ACCC aims to reframe the conversation between DLBCL patients and their providers to incorporate new therapy advancements and set positive, realistic expectations with patients about their treatment journey. In May 2024, ACCC met with the lymphoma care team at Virginia Oncology Associates, a dedicated multidisciplinary team offering comprehensive community-based cancer care and clinical research. This spotlight delves into the practices, strategies, and partnerships that have enhanced supportive care practices at VOA and describes the impact on the overall patient experience.

### Virginia Oncology Associates

LOCATION: Hampton, VA



Virginia Oncology Associates (VOA) is a group of 46 practicing physicians and a team of allied health professionals devoted exclusively to the treatment of cancer and blood disorders. With 9 locations spanning the southeast region of Virginia and northeastern North Carolina, VOA serves a large population of patients in the community. The range of patient services available includes

| Patient Volumes                          |   |
|--|---|
| Patients diagnosed with DLBCL            | 40  |
| Patients monitored, no current treatment | 31  |
| Patients in active treatment             | 3   |
| Total new patients                       | 2   |
| Patient Profiles                         |   |
| Typical patient demographics             | Race: White 71.1%, Black 23.3%, Unknown 2.1%, Hispanic 0.2%, Other 2.0%, Asian 1.1%, North American Native 0.1% |
| Languages spoken                         | English, Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog, Urdu  |

medical oncology, radiation oncology, gynecologic oncology, hematology, diagnostics (including hematopathology and radiology), clinical research, stem cell transplantation, chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T-cell therapy, genetic counseling, palliative care, and psychosocial oncology.

### Diagnostic Precision and Tailored Treatment

A timely and accurate diagnosis is the foundation of every care pathway for DLBCL patients at VOA. A system-wide tumor board meets each week, including 4 hematopathologists and several radiologists. For each patient case, it is confirmed that all workup necessary to ensure a correct diagnosis has been performed. Pathology and genetics are reviewed, and diagnostic consensus is established across all hematopathologists before proceeding to treatment recommendations. Drawing on the expertise of hematology, medical oncology, and radiation oncology, personalized treatment recommendations are offered for each patient. A clinical research coordinator is also present to advise on clinical trial eligibility. Utilizing this approach, VOA tailors each treatment plan to consider the patient's unique medical history, disease characteristics, and treatment preferences.

The next step in the VOA care continuum involves the physician sitting down with the patient and caregiver to review the patient's pathology and diagnosis. One of the hallmarks of VOA's approach is an emphasis on patient education, especially through the structured chemotherapy teaching program, which is offered prior to treatment initiation. Guided by a team of specialized oncology advanced practice providers, the program provides:

- Anticipatory guidance—patients are counseled on expected side effects and proactively taught strategies to mitigate them.
- PRN anti-emetic prescriptions given in advance to be filled by patients as needed.
- Supplemental learning resources to be used for reference at home.

Additionally, VOA is creating a chemotherapy education video library that patients can utilize as a point-of-reference, reviewing what was discussed during the patient-provider discussion. In this manner, VOA aims to educate not only the patient, but also the patient's entire support network so that all individuals involved in the patient's care know what to

expect. This proactive approach empowers patients to actively participate in their care, fostering a sense of autonomy and confidence during an inherently uncertain process.

**"It's very vital in terms of being able to help the patients understand exactly why they're being treated, whether it's a curative measure, supportive, or palliative... I would encourage any practice to make sure they embed that within their care system."**

**—Jennifer Taylor, nursing director**

### Clinical Research Opportunities

VOA participates in clinical trials in partnership with Sarah Cannon Research Institute (SCRI) and US Oncology Research, an organization dedicated to supporting community-based clinical trials. Over the last three decades, SCRI has participated in over 600 first-in-human clinical trials and contributed to many therapeutic advances in oncology approved by the FDA today.

**"Physician involvement is what allows us to enroll [patients] quickly."**

**—Karen McClain, RN, BSN, OCN**

At VOA, physicians are made aware of clinical trial opportunities as they become available. This knowledge base allows physicians to meaningfully describe clinical trials to new patients who are potential candidates, especially during the first encounter (which is often while the patient is hospitalized). Leveraging effective physician-patient communication, patients are able to receive testing required for trial eligibility, such as PET scans, which are often notoriously difficult to obtain in a timely manner. With this strategy, VOA achieves significant clinical trial enrollment in a community setting.

Currently, there are DLBCL-specific clinical trial opportunities that are actively recruiting and upcoming DLBCL clinical trials anticipated for the future.

### Comprehensive Care and Support Services

Beyond medical treatment, VOA prioritizes the holistic well-being of patients by addressing their psychosocial, financial, and logistical needs. During a monthly multidisciplinary huddle, the following professionals meet to brainstorm ways

to remove barriers to care: physicians, advanced practice providers, nurse navigators, social work, medical billing, and pharmacy managers. Utilizing this robust network of ancillary services, VOA provides personalized support tailored to each patient's unique circumstances. For example:

- Patients who may be struggling with food insecurity are connected to VOA's in-house food bank.
- A billing representative may offer insight into how best to use a patient's insurance (as well as any cost reduction programs).
- A biweekly "mortality risk report" is reviewed, highlighting patients at an increased risk of death based on known risk factors such as vital signs, protein level, cachexia, weight loss, etc. These patients are elevated to a higher level of observation and proactive support.
- As needs arise, patients are connected to palliative care services that aim to go beyond symptomatic support – addressing emotional and spiritual needs as well.

In response to a question about what they would recommend any community cancer program to have or enhance, Dawn Quinn, CCC, said, "Nurse navigators, because nurse navigators catch the crumbs... they follow up with patients regularly and reinforce everything that has been laid before."

Quinn highlights another successful VOA initiative: "Our social work, navigation, supportive care services group (which encompasses palliative) ... did an advance directive clinic... four hours in the office setting." The goal of the clinic was "to familiarize folks" with advance directives. It was drop-in, so patients could "walk up to the table... to talk about code status, advance directives, that sort of thing." Quinn emphasizes the success of the event, stating: "We expect to do that frequently."

VOA's collaboration with community organizations and health care partners further enriches the resources available to patients. Through a grant made available to VOA patients through a partnership with Sentara Health, patients receive transportation support when they are unable to travel back and forth to receive treatment. Uber will transport the patient to and from the clinical setting, at no cost to them.

VOA medical director, Scott Kruger, MD, FACP highlights the integral use of pharmacy specialists in their program: "These drugs are so expensive... docs don't know how much these things cost... we have pharmacy specialists who find a way

to get these people medicine. If it's not a free drug, it's copay assistance, it's outside help, outside grants... Whether you need help or you don't need help, everyone gets the same support."

### Patient-Centric Education Initiatives

Education is a cornerstone of VOA's patient-centric approach, empowering patients with knowledge and equipping them to make informed decisions about their care. As mentioned above, VOA recognizes the diverse learning preferences of patients and provides strategic educational resources including chemotherapy education videos, interactive workshops, and educational podcasts. Many patients discovered VOA through their online podcasts, prompting patients to seek care for their cancer diagnosis at their institution. A 10-minute video available to all new patients, titled "What to Expect at a Hematology Appointment at VOA," walks patients and caregivers through the typical experience and provides information about frequently asked questions and potential tests that may be needed.

*"We're still developing process, but we're making chemotherapy education videos, which will be available for our patients and their families, their extended families. So, they have those [videos] as references to be able to go back and look and see 'How am I supposed to manage that side effect?...' And then also, when someone's sitting and getting a lot of information, they're going to miss stuff. So, it's a good secondary, third, fourth pass [of patient education.]"*

*–Susan Miller, PA-C*

These tools provide accessible and engaging platforms for patients to deepen their understanding of treatment modalities, side effect management, and self-care practices, fostering a culture of health literacy and patient empowerment.



### VOA's Educational Podcasts

VOA's educational podcasts, which are available to all patients and caregivers, can be found on [feeds.buzzsprout.com/2167428.rss](https://feeds.buzzsprout.com/2167428.rss). All podcast episodes can be found on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Amazon Music.

## Conclusion

Virginia Oncology Associates exemplifies a paradigm of excellence in community-based diffuse large B-cell lymphoma care, anchored in a patient-centric ethos, multidisciplinary collaboration, and partnerships with community stakeholders. Using a meticulous diagnostic approach, comprehensive treatment strategies, clinical

research opportunities, and an unwavering commitment to patient support, VOA sets a gold standard for community oncology practices nationwide. As VOA continues to evolve, it remains dedicated to advancing DLBCL care and improving outcomes for patients and caregivers, reaffirming its position as a leader in oncology excellence.

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