

Introduction

Small cell lung cancer (SCLC) is considered an aggressive form of lung cancer with poor prognosis. It is characterized by rapid and uncontrolled growth of cells in the lungs.¹ Small cell lung cancer has a doubling time as short as 30 days and is notable for rapid metastases to lymph nodes and other organs.² Approximately 1 in 4 lung malignancies are small cell lung cancer.²

Tobacco use is the primary risk factor for small cell lung cancer.¹ Individuals who smoke have a risk of developing lung cancer that is 10 to 17 times higher than nonsmokers.² Increased risk is attributed to the number of cigarettes smoked per day and the number of years smoked. In addition, symptoms vary from person to person, with most individuals presenting with respiratory symptoms (eg, cough, dyspnea) at diagnosis.³

Staging is used to define patients with disease limited to thorax only, referred to as limited-stage disease, and small cell lung cancer that has metastasized, referred to as extensive stage disease.³ Limited-stage small cell lung cancer

is considered curable in approximately 25% of individuals, while extensive stage is considered difficult to treat.¹ Recurrent disease refers to disease that has returned after treatment. Standard treatment varies by stage, options are outlined in **Table 1**.⁴

Although progress has been slow over the past few decades in new treatments for small cell lung cancer, recently there are multiple clinical trials underway examining targeted therapies to treat the disease.¹ The results of which are likely to change the way small cell lung cancer is treated.

Lessons Learned From Phase I

Provider and Patient Surveys

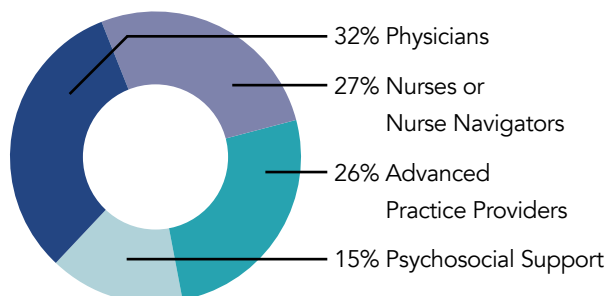
In 2022, the Association of Community Cancer Centers (ACCC) deployed surveys to providers and patients to uncover barriers in obtaining optimal care for patients with small cell lung cancer. The intention was to gain a better understanding of the factors that delay diagnosis and treatment, as well as lead to poor symptom management among patients.⁵

Table 1. Standard Treatment Options for Patients With Small Cell Lung Cancer⁴

Stage	Standard treatment options
Limited-stage disease	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chemotherapy and radiation therapy • Combination chemotherapy alone • Surgery followed by chemotherapy or chemoradiation therapy • Prophylactic cranial irradiation • Clinical trial
Extensive-stage disease	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immune checkpoint modulation and combination chemotherapy • Combination chemotherapy • Radiation therapy • Thoracic radiation therapy for patients who respond to chemotherapy • Prophylactic cranial irradiation • Clinical trial
Recurrent disease	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chemotherapy • Immune checkpoint modulation • Clinical trial • Palliative therapy

The provider survey had 100 provider responses. Break out by provider type is shown in **Figure 1**.⁵

Figure 1. Percent Response by Provider type⁴



Physicians, advanced practice providers, and nurses or nurse navigators were equally split among working environments. Thirty-four percent (34%) work in community cancer program and 34% work in private practice.⁵ By comparison, 47% of psychosocial support providers noted working in a private or physician practice.

The patient survey had 51 respondents.⁵ Median patient age was 40 years, and 59% had limited-stage small cell lung cancer. Forty-five percent (45%) of patients held private insurance, 33% were Medicare beneficiaries, 8% had Medicaid, and 2% were under or uninsured. Racial and ethnic breakup for patients

showed 69% were White, 10% were Black, and 6% were one of the following Asian/Asian American, Hispanic/Latinx, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

Diagnosis and Management of Small Cell Lung Cancer

Small cell lung cancer, known for its rapid growth and spread to other parts of the body, is important to detect as early as possible. Additionally, clinical presentation can be consistent with pulmonary inflammatory or infectious conditions, leading to delays in appropriate management.⁶ ACCC’s patient survey, showed patients saw an average of 3 doctors for their symptoms prior to receiving a diagnosis of small cell lung cancer.

The top 3 contributors to a delay in small cell lung cancer by providers is outlined in **Figure 2**. They included biopsy confirmation or pathology results, patient access to care, and scheduling delays such as availability of office appointments.⁵

Quality of life was examined in the provider survey. A good quality of life is defined as the ability to continue daily living or desired activities, achieve goals, and interact with family and friends. Providers reported quality of life as an important factor in making treatment decisions, see **Figure 3**.⁵

Figure 2. Provider-Reported Reasons Contributing to Delays in Small Cell Lung Cancer Diagnosis

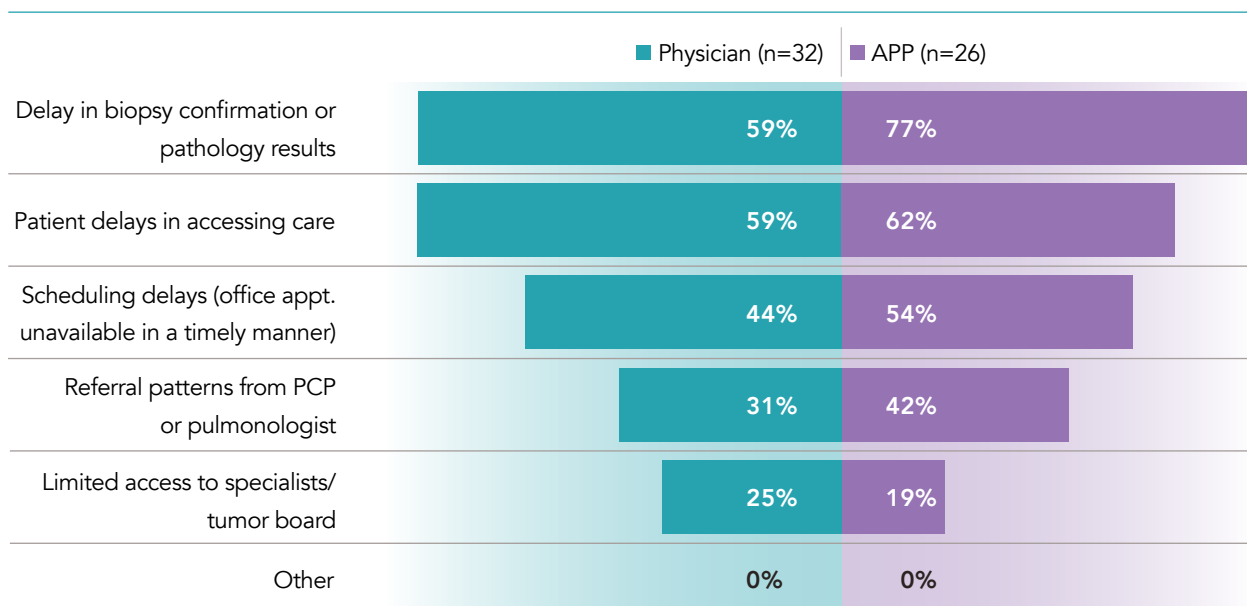
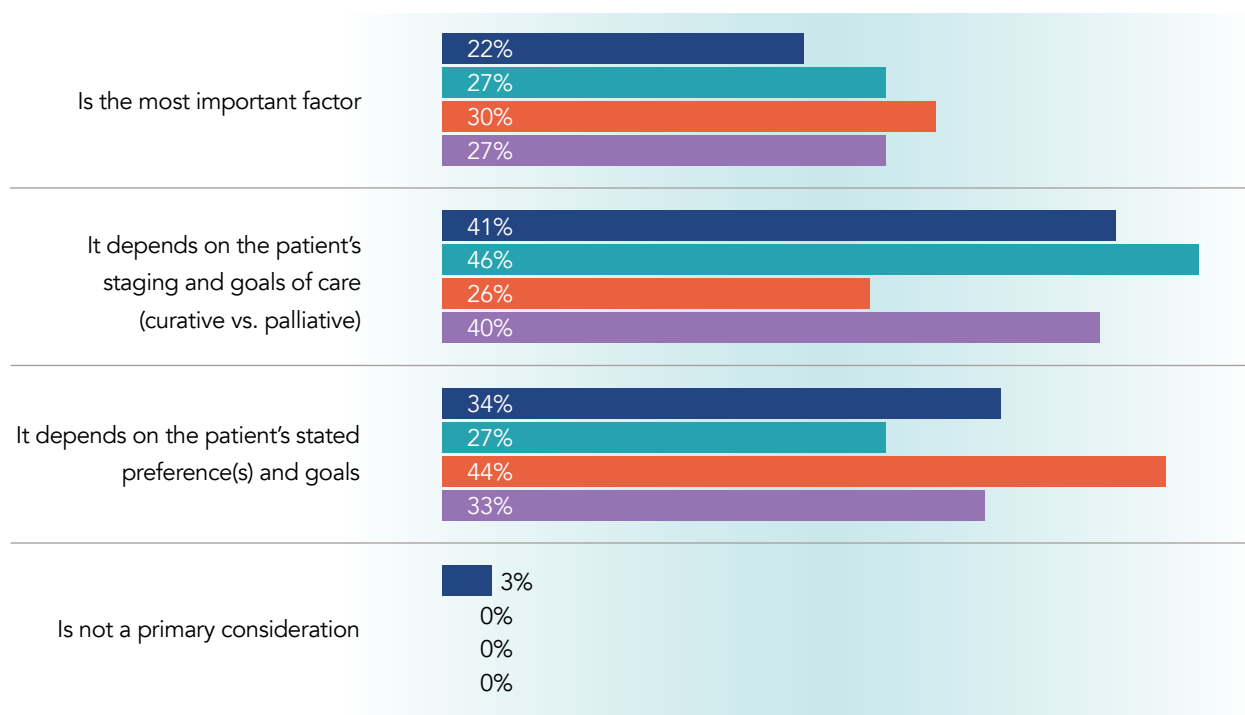


Figure 3. Provider-Reported Role of QOL in Making Treatment Decisions⁵

How significant is patient quality of life when making treatment recommendations?

■ Physician (n=32) ■ APP (n=26) ■ Nurse (n=27) ■ PSS (n=15)



Most providers reported the importance of quality of life in treatment planning was dependent on disease staging, and type of treatment (ie, curative vs palliative).⁵

The patient survey found that patients reported that their quality of life could be improved with support of the following challenges during treatment: management of their pain or any other unwanted symptoms, addressing their psychological well-being, help with logistical aspects of care (eg, financial barriers and living situations), and addressing spiritual or existential suffering.⁵

This disease has a considerable burden on patients, with significant impact on quality of life. Patients with small cell lung cancer often present with symptoms indicating widespread metastatic disease (eg, weight loss, bone pain, and neurologic compromise). Increasing symptom burden has a negative impact on patients' quality of life. ACCC's patient survey identified the most bothersome symptoms of small cell lung cancer, see **Figure 4.**⁵

Treatment Patterns and Referrals

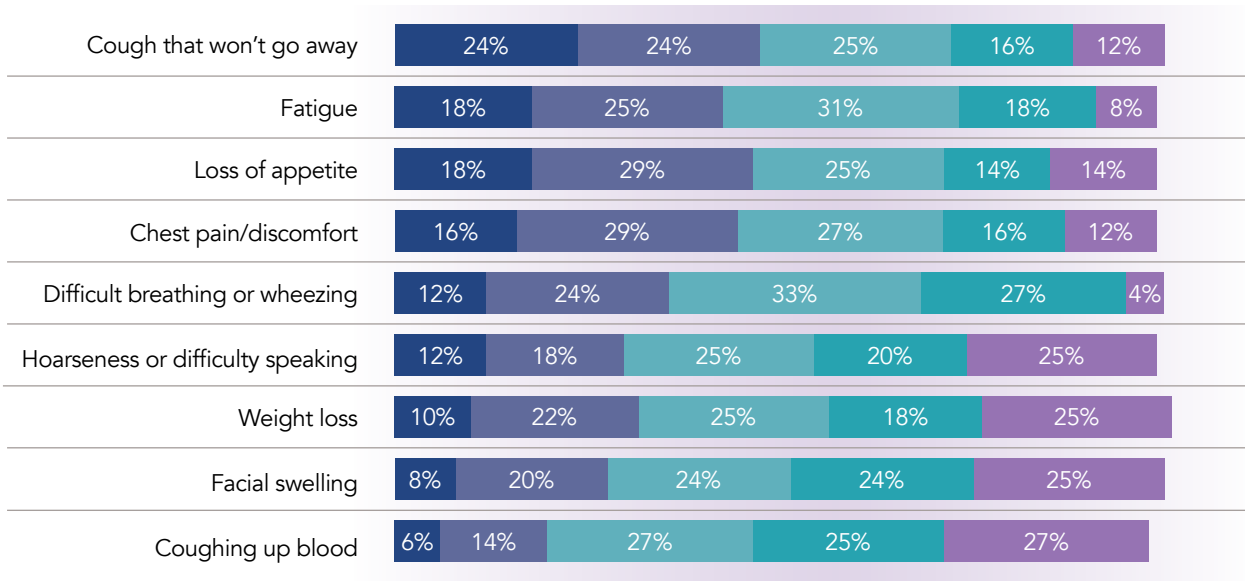
The provider survey examined treatment patterns and clinical trial referrals. Most physicians (51%) and advanced practice providers (67%) said they were highly likely to refer patients to a clinical trial, based on availability.⁵ However, it was noted that first-line treatment would be used first. Barriers to clinical trial participation were also identified as lack of trial availability, lack of transportation or other logistical barriers, patient preference, narrow inclusion criteria, and need for more immediate treatment.

For treatment of patients with extensive-stage small cell lung cancer, providers noted that 80% of patients receive a platinum doublet plus atezolizumab or durvalumab as first-line therapy.⁵ For the 18% of patients who receive chemotherapy only as first-line treatment, providers noted, autoimmune disorders, prior allergies, and cost concerns were reasons for doing so. Providers also noted that 4% of patients with extensive-stage small cell lung cancer did not receive first-line treatment due to fac-

Figure 4. Patient-Reported Frequency of Symptoms⁵

How often are each of the following potential symptoms of SCLC bothersome to you?

■ Multiple times per day ■ Daily ■ Weekly ■ Present, but bothers me less than once per week ■ Not present



Other symptoms related to SCLC

Sleep issues/tired/weakness **8%** | Back/spine pain/localized pain **6%** | Trouble eating/weight loss **6%** | Fever **3%** | Blood issues/bleeding **3%** | Inflammation/swelling **3%**

tors such as poor performance status, multiple comorbidities, and patients' decision to choose palliative care.

An examination of second-line treatment found 13% of physicians, and 20% of advanced practice providers reported that less than or equal to 50% of their patients with extensive-stage small cell lung cancer initiated second-line treatment at disease progression.⁵ The physician survey found many factors at play when considering whether to recommend platinum-based rechallenge when choosing subsequent systemic therapy for patients with small cell lung cancer. These include degree and duration of first response, patient performance status and organ function, as well as number of comorbidities. Barriers to second-line treatment were identified as patient fitness, management of treatment-related adverse events, and the presence of multiple comorbidities.

Support Services

The physician survey found that education and information shared with patients, including an explanation of the diagnosis, answering questions, providing educational handouts and trusted internet resources, and providing referrals to supportive care services, was most often done by advanced practice providers, nurses, and psychosocial support providers.⁵

In addition, physicians reported patient referrals to palliative or supportive care occurred at various stages during treatment. This includes after failure of multiple lines of therapy, upon first recurrence or refractory disease, at diagnosis, or when symptoms become difficult to manage or are uncontrolled. Comparatively, advanced practice providers noted referring patients to supportive services when symptoms became difficult to manage or after multiple lines of therapy.

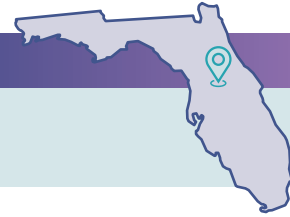
Best Practices

In addition to the patient and providers surveys, ACCC examined best practices in treatment of small cell lung cancer. The following cancer programs highlight best practices in specific areas of cancer care.

AdventHealth Cancer Institute Waterman

LOCATION: Tavares, Florida

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE: Patient Navigation and Community Partnerships



AdventHealth Cancer Institute Waterman (Advent Waterman) established a lung nodule clinic to further streamline the diagnosis of lung cancer after a positive screen and reduce delays in the assessment of incidental nodules. As a result, the lung navigator's role expanded to support the lung nodule clinic and connection to the cancer treatment team.

Next Steps: AdventHealth Waterman has a strong, skilled multidisciplinary team committed to caring for patients impacted by small cell lung cancer. Moving forward, the team at AdventHealth aims to grow the lung cancer screening program and lung nodule clinic and expand community partnerships to support patients across the lung cancer continuum.

"Navigation is key. Capturing patients up front, helping them figure out their next step is critical. Then getting patients to the right specialist at the right time whether through the lung nodule clinic or connecting them to our multidisciplinary cancer care team—navigation is the glue that holds the process together. Plus, the clinical outcomes that can be addressed are substantial."

— **Leslie K. Maxwell, MBA,**
Director,
AdventHealth Cancer Institute Waterman

Corewell Health

LOCATION: Taylor, Michigan

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE: Timely Diagnosis to Treatment Initiation



Corewell Health's lung clinic includes a multidisciplinary provider team comprised of pulmonologists, interventional pulmonologists, nurses, a nurse coordinator, a clinical nurse manager, lung cancer nurse navigators, a cardiothoracic surgeon, oncologists, radiation oncologists, and many more providers and staff who play a critical role in ensuring quality, patient-centered care. The lung clinic has a strong referral network, and typically receives 25 to 50 referrals a week for diagnostic workup. The team works together to triage patients and get them in as quickly as possible.

Next Steps: Building on the strong foundation, Corewell Health is investing in additional diagnostic tools and research to improve outcomes of patients impacted by lung cancer. The team hopes the innovative work they

are doing in Michigan will be able to be replicated across the country for all patients.

"Start simple. What is it that you are intending to do? Are you intending to optimize your diagnostics? Are you attempting to accelerate recovery? Are you attempting to improve your therapeutics? Or something else? Then decide how do you get your toe in the water, and then you must crawl before you walk, and you must walk before you sprint. But collective intelligence is going to be the key for success."

— **Gustavo Cumbo-Nacheli, MD, FCCP, DAABIP**
Interventional pulmonologist,
Corewell Health

Levine Cancer Institute

LOCATION: : Charlotte, North Carolina

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE: Comprehensive Support Program



The Levine Cancer Institute's Cancer Committee identified an opportunity to improve support for patients who receive a diagnosis of lung cancer. Levine sees a wide range of people impacted by lung cancer. Each year, the Health System diagnoses 900 new cases of lung cancer, with approximately 150 cases representing small cell lung cancer. The cancer committee coalesced around a lung cancer support program. A thoracic medical oncologist championed the initiative and assembled a passionate and committed multidisciplinary team including a physical and occupational therapist, music therapist, psychologist, patient resource manager, nurse navigators, nutritionist, social worker, research scientist, and program coordinators.

Next Steps: Levine Cancer Institute now has a solid foundation in place to provide ongoing support to people impacted by lung cancer. There remains a commitment from the multidisciplinary team to continue to innovate and build out additional services to meet patients' needs.

"In my experience, people living with lung cancer commonly feel their needs are not recognized. I am proud of the fact we started a support program for patients with lung cancer to show we do care, and we can offer tailored services based on the patient's type of lung cancer."

— Michele Szafranski, MS, RD, CSO, LDN

Clinical nutrition manager,
Levine Cancer Institute

White Plains Hospital Cancer Program

LOCATION: : White Plains, New York

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE: Whole-Person Care



All patients receiving lung cancer care at White Plains Hospital Cancer Program are presented at the multidisciplinary thoracic tumor board, which meets 2 to 3 times a month. Patients are also quickly connected to a medical oncologist and the multidisciplinary team works to meet patients' needs beyond the disease itself across the care continuum. The White Plains team knows any cancer diagnosis and its treatment can significantly impact patients' quality of life. Therefore, the team has taken a whole-person approach to the structure of the infusion center. The infusion center is nursing led; nurse practitioners round regularly and follow their patients to ensure continuity of care and early intervention.

Next Steps: The team remains committed to their approach, while also identifying new opportunities, such as expanding its partnership with the American Lung Association, piloting a new palliative care model, and offering increased transportation services to reduce barriers to care.

"Our infusion center is not just a place for the delivery of treatment. It is an opportunity for us to try and make our patients' day a little easier by providing whole-person care during that time."

— Victoria Assumma, LCSW-R, ACSW, OSW-C

Oncology social worker,
White Plains Hospital Cancer Program

David M. Waterhouse, MD, MPH, Oncologist

LOCATION: Cincinnati, Ohio

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE: Clinical Trials



David M. Waterhouse, MD, MPH, a medical oncologist, has been leading the charge in lung cancer clinical trials for decades. While clinical trials for small cell lung cancer have not moved forward in the same way as trials in other disease areas, Waterhouse offers systems-level solutions to change how trials are conducted and leverage underutilized resources:

- Design trials that are patient centric. For small cell lung cancer, change enrollment criteria and allow patients to be enrolled even after the first dose of chemotherapy, eliminate central lab and radiology reviews, and be more pragmatic about what data is necessary to collect.
- Use lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic such as electronic consent, remote monitoring, delivery of treatment to home, home nurse visits, and telemedicine encounters.

- Centralize trial coordination, investigator support, consent, and other necessary research operations while decentralizing the delivery of the treatment.
- Build hybrid partnerships between academic and community programs.
- Reimburse for providers' time spent on a trial whether through a Medicare designation or J-code.

Waterhouse also stresses the importance of mentorship to foster and support researchers in building clinical trial capacity.

"Eighty-five percent of cancer care is delivered in the community. The question we should be asking is— how can we develop trials that are community-centered? Trials need to reflect the world we see, not the world we can treat."

— David M. Waterhouse, MD, MPH

Clinical and Nonclinical Challenges in Treatment

Clinical Challenges

Clinical challenges affecting care for patients with small cell lung cancer are numerous. Patients often have significant comorbidities such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cardiovascular disease, or diabetes. These preexisting comorbidities complicate a patient's ability to tolerate treatment, and may shorten their overall survival.⁹ Additionally, because of the rapid growth of small cell lung cancer, it presents as a centrally located mass that can obstruct major airways and lead to rapid clinical decline.

There are also concerns with small cell lung cancer treatments. Platinum-doublet chemotherapy, although highly effective in the initial treatment of small cell lung cancer, also has the potential to be very toxic to patients. This is especially true for patients who are starting treatment

with poor performance status at baseline. Key findings from the ACCC survey found treatment-related adverse events were the greatest deterrent to receiving the best possible small cell lung cancer care among patients.

In addition to side effects attributable to traditional chemotherapy, providers need to be cautious of immune-related adverse events (irAEs). The most frequently reported irAEs are hypothyroidism, hyperthyroidism, rash, and colitis.⁹ However, any organ system can be subject to autoimmune damage from immunotherapy use. To facilitate appropriate clinical management of irAEs, cancer providers should equip patients with immunotherapy "wallet cards" that can be presented to non-oncology providers with clear contact information for the oncology team.¹⁰ Additionally, patients should be instructed to inform their routine nononcology providers (ie, primary care provider, pulmonologist) if they are receiving immunotherapy.

Nonclinical Challenges

In addition to clinical challenges, health care providers and patients face nonclinical challenges in the management of small cell lung cancer. Nonclinical challenges include financial barriers, psychosocial issues, inadequate support systems, among others. The ACCC survey showed little consensus among physician providers in identifying the most significant barriers to providing optimal care to patients with small cell lung cancer.⁵ Top nonclinical barriers were identified as inadequate support systems, cost of care, and lack of transportation. Other hurdles were identified as poor health literacy, difficulty comprehending diagnosis, lack of access to treatment, family care considerations, and difficulty communicating with the health care team.

Financial barriers are often among the top challenges encountered by cancer patients. With the recent addition of immunotherapy to the treatment of small cell lung cancer, there is also a new layer of financial burden. Specifically, because immunotherapies can be given as maintenance therapy until disease progression or unacceptable toxicity. In the ACCC survey, physicians, more than any other provider, found treatment cost and location (ie, at home vs in clinic) to be less significant to patients in their treatment choice compared to other factors, such as overall survival or adverse events from treatment.⁵

Nurses, however, consistently perceived treatment cost, treatment location, and number of office/lab visits for ongoing treatment monitoring, to have more impact on a patients' treatment choice. In the ACCC patient survey, approximately one-third reported out-of-pocket costs or surprise bills were considered an extreme problem.⁵ Financial counselors or navigators can be a great resource to guide patients through the financial difficulties of treatment by overseeing insurance authorizations and providing co-pay assistance.¹¹

Other nonclinical challenges include stigmatization, psychological well-being, equitable care, and health literacy levels. Study results show that lung cancer stigma can result in deterred screening, delayed diagnosis, and severe psychosocial distress.¹² Along with potential stigmatization, psychological well-being and spiritual/existential suffering are also pervasive among patients

with small cell lung cancer. The ACCC patient survey found 20% reported spiritual/existential suffering as a substantial hardship, and 35% reported that support for psychological well-being was the most important aspect in assisting with treatment challenges.⁵

In addition, the patient survey found 30% indicated difficulties understanding medical language which significantly hindered optimal care.⁵ Discussions about diagnosis and treatment should always be conducted at a health literacy level appropriate to the patient to foster productive conversations and shared decision-making. Similarly, to better understand disparities, health care team members should complete a cultural competency training to recognize their own implicit biases in communicating with patients.

Multidisciplinary Care

Due to the rapid growth of small cell lung cancer, prompt diagnosis and treatment are vital and depend on the collaboration of various providers. Management of patients with small cell lung cancer is not possible without a dedicated multidisciplinary team consisting of medical oncologists, radiation oncologists, pulmonologists, primary care providers, pathologists, thoracic surgeons, nurses, advanced practice providers, pharmacists, palliative care providers, social workers, financial navigators, among others.¹³ Primary care providers and pulmonologists must be able to recognize symptoms associated with small cell lung cancer and to refer patients efficiently to medical oncologists and/or thoracic surgeons. Treatment decisions are best discussed in a multidisciplinary tumor board with input from different specialties.

Patients with small cell lung cancer are often hospitalized due to the acuity of their symptoms, which means that coordination of care between inpatient and outpatient teams is critical. To assist with treating symptoms, primary oncologists should refer patients to palliative care teams, radiation oncologists, and interventional pulmonology teams for consideration of palliative procedures and interventions. Ancillary team members, such as social workers and financial navigators, can support patients in managing nonclinical barriers to care.

Conclusion

In a post–COVID-19 era, cancer programs have seen a significant decrease in lung cancer screening, diagnosis, and treatment.¹⁴ This is particularly impactful for those with small cell lung cancer due to the aggressive nature of the disease. To address the specific needs of these patients, ACCC engaged in a multiphased educational initiative to address the challenges and burdens faced by patients with small cell lung cancer in community oncology programs and practices.

The first phase of this project focused on survey data collection and identifying barriers and gaps in care. To accomplish this, ACCC deployed surveys to providers and patients to uncover barriers in obtaining optimal care for patients with small cell lung cancer. After successful completion of the surveys, quality-of-life challenges experienced by patients with small cell lung cancer were examined. ACCC collected best practices on comprehensive care for small cell lung cancer to share with member cancer centers. The results of both are shared in this article among other published resources.

ACCC is dedicated to ensuring cancer programs have the knowledge and shared best practices to support all patients on their cancer journeys.

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