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CANCER SUPPORT GROUP ENGENDERS ADVOCACY AMONG PATIENTS

GREENSBURG, January 15, 2010 ... Cancer is an all too unpopular word that causes an emotional and physical roller coaster ride for those faced with the diagnosis. It is a disease that is so overwhelming and frightening people often don't know where to turn for needed resources and support.

For the past six years, Excelsa Health through its joint venture with UPMC Cancer Centers in the Arnold Palmer Pavilion has been offering a monthly support group for area cancer patients, their families and caregivers. In 2010, the group meets at 6:30 p.m. the second Tuesday of the month in the cancer center lobby.

Linda Johnson, practice manager for the Palmer Pavilion at Mountain View Medical Park, says this cooperative effort offers a positive and pro-active approach to understanding and managing various conditions. "Most importantly, through a group setting patients have the opportunity to talk, ask questions, gain insight, receive support and share experiences with others who have undergone similar experiences," she added.

Group member Dayle Gardner, a seven-year colon cancer survivor, said "facing and fighting cancer is not just about the patient. It's a process that involves everyone who touches that patient's life: family, friends, caregivers and co-workers."

Acknowledging cancer can be an overwhelming experience for everyone, Gardner added, "Sometimes patients find they need a new and different type of

forum in order to gain strength to face the varying stages and treatments for cancer. Many times, it's just about people reaching out and being there for each other, especially during the rough times. Often group support can fulfill that need."

For Gardner, the group represents hope, compassion and sharing. "It helps patients and family members to know someone else has gone through similar experiences and that they are not alone," she emphasized. "Through the group, we try to give people a place where they can openly talk and learn about cancer."

Leslie Stewart, RN, clinical nurse manager, Arnold Palmer Pavilion, emphasized the community benefit of the support group. "We have a great group of people who are willing to share their experiences and make themselves available to others and are always looking for new and better ways to meet the needs of our patients."

Recently, several group members teamed together to form a patient advocacy group to serve as a sounding board for staff as they focus on cancer care services from a patient's perspective. "With the introduction of this group, we hope to soften and improve overall patient experiences based upon the input of others who have experienced cancer treatment and are aware of what it takes to make the journey as comfortable as possible," noted Stewart.

The goal of the group is to identify things that will help relieve patient anxiety or raise the comfort level for those coming to the facility for treatments. "Sometimes it's the basic things that can make all the difference in ensuring a positive experience," noted Stewart. "For example, the availability of a warm blanket or snack during a chemo treatment or the presence of a greeter welcoming you to the facility."

Bobbie Cruder, a core member of the team who has been dealing with cancer for more than 22 years, is excited about plans to create a more homelike atmosphere for patients at the center by taking away the institutional or corporate feel of the facility.

“Softening the décor by adding flowers and decorations for the various holidays has helped to create a more homelike atmosphere in the lobby area,” she explained. “We want patients to feel relaxed and comfortable in an environment that is conducive to healing.”

The advocates have coordinated efforts with several musical groups who volunteer their time and services to provide entertainment for patients waiting for treatments. This has helped to provide a more festive, yet relaxing distraction for many patients.

Additionally, group members are working with community businesses to secure funding that will be used to purchase a big screen television for the lobby area. Similar community support has provided funding for additional snacks to augment the nutritional options for patients during treatments.

The group was also instrumental in enhancing communications while reducing clutter in the exam areas. Staff is now sharing announcements and promotional materials with patients in the form of a slide show. This tool also provides patients a diversion while waiting for physicians

Group members and other volunteers are routinely available to talk one on one with patients and their families during treatments, sharing experiences and describing community resources. .

For Gloria Caletri, a former caregiver to a friend with cancer, the patient advocacy group has allowed her to remain involved in helping other cancer patients and their families to cope with the disease. “Even though, I lost someone to cancer, this group has helped to fill a void and provide me with a purpose and outlet to give something back to others and still make a difference in the memory of my friend.”

“If only through a little gesture we can make someone’s experience easier during this long and challenging journey, then it’s all worthwhile,” noted Johnson . “We are here to provide a service that in the long run can be a helpful part of healing and recovery in dealing with cancer.”