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What will it mean to say ‘I have cancer’ in Dallas-Fort Worth 10 years from now

It depends on our ability to remove the silos in care

By Lalan Wilfong, Mirchelle Louis and Elaine DeMeyer

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The courage it takes to say the words “I have cancer” today is indisputably just as hard as it was 20 years ago – as is the mental and emotional rollercoaster that follows. What’s markedly changed, however, is the progress made in cancer care across those two decades.

- For perspective, only two decades ago, chemotherapy was the only treatment for patients with cancer. Now, we’re light years ahead with targeted therapies, immunotherapies and more precisely focused clinical trials.
- We are also leaning hard into cancer telehealth services to reach patients who have difficulty coming into the clinic due to infection risk, transportation issues or living in rural areas; and into new technologies, like CAR T-cell therapy, which modifies the immune system to target cancer cells.
- In the past 20 years, we’ve also added vital cancer-support services into the mix. Once deemed a “nice to have,” these critical social and emotional support services for the patient and caregivers have changed

the game in how many in our community — and across the U.S. — fare mentally during their life-altering cancer journeys.

- Navigators and financial advocates are breaking down barriers to focus on more healthful lifestyles and easier access to care. Action plans are addressing disparities or inequalities in cancer care.

The bottom line: All signs are pointing to positive progress on the cancer front. In fact, national statistics show that [cancer death rates fell 32% from a peak in 1991 to 2019](#). Additionally, social and emotional support intervention has been shown to reduce recurrence risk and potentially improve survival in patients with cancer.

What the next 10 years, and even 20, will look like, however, is much more dependent upon what we, as North Texas physicians, health care providers, patients, payers and employers do to remove a significant, unspoken impediment to cancer care progress: siloed care.

We believe that the next frontier in cancer care will be about whole-person care. That is, can we manage health care more holistically, to recognize the impact of a cancer diagnosis on the total person and what that means for long-term patient health, health care costs and quality of life?

Cancer care isn't just about medicine. There's a lot more to care than simply treatment with drugs. We're still very siloed in how we view patient care, which is slowing progress, patients' ability to survive and thrive, and the costs being incurred on so many fronts.

Here are a few statistics worth pondering:

- The Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas reports that the state is expected to see 140,000 new cases of cancer this year at a direct cost of approximately \$44.7 billion in 2020, up [\\$2 billion from 2019](#).
- 54% of [U.S. cancer patients report mental distress](#) that was never addressed throughout their cancer journey, and research shows that patients with depression have higher health care utilization (33.6 hospital visits vs. 18.8 visits), according to a study published in the [National Library of Medicine](#).
- And yet, patients participating in a 6-week cognitive-behavioral session bill the health care system 23.5% less than the control group, according to a [study on the effects of group therapy for breast cancer health care](#).

So, if we know that patients feel better with mental and emotional support, cost the health care system less and recurrence is decreased, why aren't we looking at treatment from a whole-person standpoint?

The answer is complex. The reality is that health care teams continue to function in silos. Information such as lab tests are still not shared easily between different health care teams. Specialists tend to focus on the disease they are treating. Mental health issues often go unaddressed. Financial toxicity is not managed. Caregiver burden is not evaluated. Health-related social needs go unnoticed. These are the whole-person issues that need addressing.

As Leslie Barker wrote in her [April 2022 piece](#) on Cancer Support Community North Texas' CEO Mirchelle Louis, who is also now a cancer survivor herself: "My own cancer experience allows me to speak with authenticity and authority about cancer's impact," Louis said. "I feel like I have an added responsibility to speak up and speak out and get more done. The problem ... is hearing clients tell her, 'I wish I'd known about you six months ago. We don't even see 10% of [those diagnosed.]' "

Again, part of the reason for this speaks to our siloed nature. The more we, as a health care system, look at social and emotional support as a critical part of holistic cancer care, the more we can help improve patient outcomes and decrease hospital utilization.

In fact, this year marks the 20th anniversary of Cancer Support Community North Texas, a nonprofit organization that began in a small Oak Lawn location and now provides mental health support to more than 5,000 diverse patients with cancer and their caregivers annually at three Dallas-Fort Worth "clubhouses." CSCNT is considered a flagship organization nationally and patients even come from out of state for services and support. Now just imagine what impact we could have if this critical support became fully integrated into cancer care — if, as Louis says, CSCNT could reach the "other 90%" who haven't yet heard about them yet.

If we can dissolve the siloed care, when combined with the exciting advancements around the corner — from individualized prevention and treatment strategies, such as first-in-kind clinical trials testing multiple drugs and digital provider-patient communication technology, to major efforts to address health equity and medical outcome issues in disadvantaged communities — we can make the next two decades of cancer care even better.

For anyone touched by cancer in North Texas, take the first important step: Ensure your friends and family have access to services that help provide holistic care. Visit www.cancersupporttexas.org.

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