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Organizations navigate breast cancer journey from education to support

by Michelle Leach

Breast cancer is more than a month or the color pink for leadership working year-round to prevent, detect, treat, and support survivors diagnosed at a rate of one every two minutes in the U.S., according to the National Breast Cancer Foundation.

The Fred & Pamela Buffett Cancer Center opened in June, and Director Dr. Kenneth H. Cowan said the integrated, multidisciplinary approach to research and care was piloted in the breast cancer program.

“It’s been a huge success,” he said. “They can see every specialist they need to see.”



Cowan

Further, a multidisciplinary team reviews cases in new, large conference rooms conducive to collaboration among researchers and clinicians. The multidisciplinary clinic is accompanied by the inpatient cancer hospital, designed with integration in mind — 24/7 access allows patients to be seen without having to be admitted to the ER. Infusion center and diagnostics services such as radiology imaging suites are available onsite.

“We have three new linear accelerators for much more focused and faster therapies,” Cowan said, referring to advanced radiation

machines that deliver precise radiation — reportedly accurate to the millimeter.

When asked about feedback since the center’s opening, Cowan indicated patients appreciate education — communication from the multidisciplinary team, and he acknowledged their focus on healing arts, represented partly by The Chihuly Sanctuary, a space for peaceful meditation, and Leslie’s Healing Garden.

Stressors related to paying for treatment are addressed with an onsite financial counselor and, going forward, Cowan sees even more focus on personalized treatment, using novel therapies targeting each patient’s individual tumor, and with scientists playing a critical part as they understand the science behind genetic changes that might inhibit treatment.

“We often hear people say that breast cancer is ‘no big deal anymore’ and that some people believe that breast cancer is easily treatable or ‘already cured,’” said CEO Karen Daneu of Komen Great Plains, which merged with Komen Nebraska and Komen South Dakota this year. “Over 40,000 women and 400 men die from breast cancer each year.”

A leading cause of cancer deaths for women aged 20 to 39 stateside, Daneu said misconceptions include one is “too young” to develop cancer, or doesn’t need screening because no family member had it, and that “mammograms hurt.”

Komen provides facts during lunch-and-learns, small groups settings, and via trained

volunteers.

Reducing the number of breast cancer deaths ties to “Bold Goal” objectives announced last year and represents a long-term goal, but research to treat aggressive forms of cancer and metastatic disease, and to increase access to care are two focus areas. Grants, partly, are addressing access — where to go, and how to get and pay for treatment.



Daneu

“One grantee provides transportation, lodging, and meal coupons for women in treatment that have to travel more than 300 miles,” she said.

All 60 women enrolled last year were able to complete their treatment regimen. Daneu also said the “Mammovan” has provided 200-plus free mammograms to date, and a number of businesses use the van to improve screenings, with more companies using it after presentations Komen gave in the past 15 months.

About 29 percent of women with insurance who don’t get screened due to driving, parking and child care issues.

In addition to the merger designed to “improve the operational effectiveness” of

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the Komen’s Nebraska and South Dakota offices, Daneu said they’ve also partnered with Methodist Health System to purchase a state-of-the-art 3-D mobile mammography van.

Methodist Hospital Diagnostic Imaging Services Service Executive Sharlon Rodgers said it’s the first mobile unit of its kind in the state. Otherwise, the closest for-profit unit is in Kansas City and the closest nonprofit unit is in South Dakota.



Block

Rodgers said the unit will feature 3-D breast screening at a low-radiation dose, while providing enhanced image quality for radiologists evaluating images for early detection.

“Nebraska currently ranks 40th out of 50 states for mammogram screening,” she said. “Additionally, recent numbers show a drop in mammogram screening rates in Douglas County.”

The unit will operate in underserved areas in Nebraska and Iowa, such as Charles Drew Health Center and OneWorld Community Health Centers.

“Many women who are uninsured don’t have access to screening, let alone state-of-the art 3-D mammography, which does an even better job with detection,” Rodgers said. “Women, who are uninsured or underinsured, will have an opportunity to

have their mammograms covered through charitable care.”

Parked outside major employers’ sites, screening may be done in 20 minutes.

At the time of this writing, \$500,000 of the \$655,000 startup costs has been raised. A natural extension for wellness, Rodgers said they plan to have the unit available this spring, with more details on booking in the coming months.

Regarding research, Nebraska Cancer Specialists is participating in a clinical study to evaluate a new treatment for patients with HER2-positive breast cancer. Known as

HER2CLIMB, the study evaluates investigational medication, Tucatinib, combined with standard treatments for locally advanced or metastatic HER2-positive breast cancer.

Despite treatment advances, there is



Lovgren

Specialists.

HER2 is reportedly associated with shorter survival times, higher risk of recurrence and brain metastases. It represents an estimated 20 to 25 percent of the roughly 234,000 annual breast cancer diagnoses in the U.S.

Tucatinib is a HER2 inhibitor designed specifically to target and inhibit the growth of HER2-positive cancer cells. Block said they are seeking study participants with advanced HER2-positive breast cancer.

When looking to prevention, Project Extra Mile is working to highlight the “alcohol-cancer connection.”

“Alcoholic beverages are classified as a Group 1 human carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer,” said Executive Director Chris Wagner.

Tobacco products, asbestos, X- and gamma-radiation, and Hep B and C viruses represent other substances listed as “known human carcinogens,” according to Wagner, who further notes alcohol is a leading preventable cause of breast cancer accounting for about 15 percent of all these deaths in the U.S. But he said only 39 percent of Americans identify alcohol as a cancer risk.

In turn, last year they held a coalition meeting devoted to the topic, and they’re advocating for evidence-based policies to prevent and reduce “alcohol-related harms,” including cancer.

“We are also building relationships in the medical and prevention fields to address the lack of awareness on this issue,” Wagner said.

Omaha Professional Fire Fighters Local 385 is helping to support survivors’ day-to-day needs by supporting Project Pink’d, an organization that helps ease the burden of expenses such as rent, prescriptions or utilities for those going through treatment.

still a significant need for new therapies that can impact the lives of patients with advanced HER2-positive breast cancer, including cancer that has spread to the brain, and that can be tolerated for long periods of time,” said Dr. Margaret Block of Nebraska Cancer

“We became acquainted with Project Pink’d after one of our member’s wives was diagnosed with breast cancer,” said Captain Trevor Towey. “Project Pink’d was by their family’s side helping with anything they needed and was an incredible resource for them in such a difficult time for their family.”

Originally, firefighters were encouraged to buy pink T-shirts and wear them on duty during October, but Towey said they expanded the impact with the #OmahaPinkd-Out initiative, which encourages Omahans to ‘Light It Up Pink’d’ by purchasing a pink lightbulb or floodlight from their Union Hall, to remain lit throughout the month.

“We encourage business owners to turn the exterior of their building pink in support of breast cancer awareness as well,” he said. “In an emergency, your Omaha Fire Fighters are there to help.”

Casting for Recovery Nebraska/South Dakota hosts fly-fishing retreats at The Prairie Club in the Sandhills for those navigating the breast cancer experience — what Program Coordinator Linda Lovgren called “a new, unique support system.”

“On a physical level, the gentle, rhythmic motion of fly casting is similar to exercises often prescribed after surgery or radiation to promote soft tissue stretching,” she said. “On an emotional level, women are given the opportunity to experience a new activity in a safe environment amongst a supportive group of peers.”

Retreats provide resources to address quality of life issues after diagnosis, and offer fly-fishing as a new outlet and reprieve from everyday stresses and challenges of cancer, Lovgren said.

Since offering the first Nebraska retreat in 2011, 140 women have participated. Any survivor, any age and any stage may apply, and participants are randomly selected by the National organization.

Fourteen participants are selected for each retreat, and no fishing experience is needed, and all equipment and gear is provided.

Due to demand, retreats have grown from one to two a year, and applications from 24 in 2011 to 84 in 2017.

“The need is even greater,” she said. “Over 1,200 Nebraska women are diagnosed with breast cancer each year.”



Sharlon Rodgers, service executive, diagnostic imaging services at Methodist Hospital.