

spotlight

Grand Valley Oncology Grand Junction, Colorado



Separated from Denver, Colorado Springs, and Fort Collins by the mountainous Continental Divide, the Western Slope is not what typically comes to mind when one thinks of Colorado. It is not as economically prosperous or developed as the state's Front Range. But that has not stopped Grand Valley Oncology, located in Grand Junction, Colo., from establishing itself as one of the premier cancer care providers in the region thanks to the comprehensiveness of its services and staff experience.

Grand Valley Oncology, a freestanding cancer care facility wholly owned by Community Hospital, provides full spectrum outpatient medical and radiation oncology services as well as robust survivorship and integrative therapies programs. Though it primarily serves Mesa County, which has a population of around 150,000, Grand Valley Oncology's catchment area expands across Colorado's Western Slope and into eastern Utah, reaching a patient population of over 300,000. Through its affiliation with the Huntsman Cancer Institute in Salt Lake City, the cancer center is able to offer state-of-the-art clinical trials to this geographically disparate population.

The center is currently staffed by four medical oncologists, three radiation oncologists, a gynecologic oncologist, a survivorship physician, 18 nurses, a nurse practitioner, and six medical assistants. A dedicated oncology pharmacy is staffed by a director, staff pharmacist, PRN pharmacist, and two certified pharmacy technicians.

Retrofitting a Surgical Center

Before the founding of Grand Valley Oncology, Community Hospital did not offer

any oncology services. Chris Thomas, FACHE, president and CEO of Community Hospital, says that the hospital did not want to offer cancer care as an afterthought. "If we were going to be in the cancer business," says Thomas, "I wanted a cancer center where I'd have no reservations about my wife receiving care."

In 2014, a number of local oncology care providers, impressed with the direction in which Community Hospital was moving, approached the hospital about starting a cancer care program. It was decided that the hospital would move forward with its development of a cancer program, but a location was needed.

Fortunately for the hospital, there was an easy solution. Four months prior to being approached about a potential cancer program, a hospital-owned surgical practice had left its freestanding surgical center to join the Community Hospital main campus in a joint venture with physician partners. The state-of-the-art, 15,000-square-foot, one-story building constructed to hospital standards with parking was a perfect fit for the new program. For less than \$500,000, Community Hospital was able to retrofit the surgical center as an oncology center. The postanesthesia care unit with 12 recovery stations became a 12-station infusion center, procedure rooms became examination rooms, and operating rooms became survivorship program areas and tumor board meeting rooms. One hundred days after the initial meeting, Grand Valley Oncology opened its doors for the first time.

In 2016, Grand Valley Oncology began offering radiation oncology services, but to conserve space and increase efficiency, the

radiation vault was attached to the outpatient imaging department on the hospital campus less than 5 miles away. Rather than duplicating services and arranging for a waiting room, exam rooms, radiation oncologist offices, and staff space, it was decided that space could simply be shared with the existing outpatient imagery department at the hospital.

The cancer center has since gone on to outgrow its current freestanding building and is looking to bring the medical oncology department to the main hospital campus, where there are still 17 undeveloped acres of land. At a new location, Grand Valley Oncology hopes to reunite radiation oncology with the rest of its services.

The Huntsman Cancer Institute

Community Hospital had a loose affiliation with the Huntsman Cancer Institute prior to the foundation of Grand Valley Oncology, but the two cancer programs agreed to formalize their affiliation in order to provide the best possible care for Western Slope residents. During the retrofitting process, Huntsman provided assistance with infrastructure for the information technology system, as well as advice on policy and protocol. Grand Valley Oncology is a participating member of Huntsman's tumor boards, and Huntsman provides insight on quality control.

With Huntsman acting as their internal review board, Grand Valley Oncology launched its clinical trials program in the summer of 2017. Grand Valley Oncology is currently coordinating seven different external trials and coordinating and overseeing one internal clinical trial.

Additionally, because of Huntsman’s educational affiliation with the University of Utah, Community Hospital saw an opportunity to provide additional education for their staff. Nurses rotate through the university and Huntsman Cancer Institute in order to gain training in areas that may not be available to them in Grand Junction, such as infusion, clinical trials, and radiation oncology nursing. These skills will help Grand Valley Oncology as it works toward receiving Commission on Cancer accreditation in the second quarter of 2018. Says Thomas, “The partnership with the University of Utah did exactly what I’d hoped it would do—to make sure that we had a quality program from the beginning, and we had the infrastructure and resources to get that done.”

In addition to their tangible contributions, Huntsman has also helped Grand Valley Oncology attract new physicians. Although the Western Slope is famed for its skiing, its remote nature can often turn top doctors away, but an affiliation with Huntsman makes the practice much more attractive. Four new oncologists have joined since the program’s founding. “These are doctors who have an outstanding reputation,” says Thomas. “This is where physicians send their family members for cancer care. They have confidence in their counterparts throughout the community.”

A Range of Skills and Services

A great source of Grand Valley Oncology’s strength is the breadth and depth of services and staff experience. From the outset, Thomas placed a focus on hiring staff members with experience in multiple disciplines, including integrative oncology, survivorship programming, and hospice and palliative care. For instance, medical oncologist Jonathan D. King, MD, is board certified in hospice and palliative medicine, as well as internal medicine, hematology, and clinical oncology. The cancer center has a strong partnership with HopeWest, a community hospice and palliative care center, for when patients need inpatient care.

Grand Valley Oncology also boasts a robust survivorship program led by Kathryn Tarman, MD. Dr. Tarman was given free rein by Thomas and hospital leadership to develop the cancer center’s integrative therapy offerings and survivorship program. Retrofitted operating rooms now serve as room for therapies like acupuncture, guided imagery, massage, tai chi, and yoga. Weight counseling and nutrition services are also available, and essential oils patches can be provided during infusion to combat nausea and other side effects. Physical, occupational, and speech therapies are offered on the Community Hospital campus, as is a lymphedema clinic. The cancer center also employs the only gynecologic oncology surgeon on the Western Slope, and their social worker is licensed in both clinical social work and addiction counseling.

Incorporating physicians with different subspecialties allows for more comprehensive and holistic care for patients, and doctors often do outreach in the surrounding community to promote a greater understanding of cancer care. Says Thomas, “We’ve really tried to make this a program of outreach and education, and I’m very proud of the work the team is doing to support our community—not just treating patients but being resources, being part of the community to advance the knowledge of this disease.”



Select Support Services

- Support groups
- Genetic counseling
- Integrative therapies
- Fitness and nutrition services

Number of new analytic cases seen in 2016: 844.