

spotlight

Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute Great Falls, Montana



Located in central Montana, Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute provides multidisciplinary cancer care to a vast 13-county region bordering the Rocky Mountains. This catchment area is larger than the states of Connecticut, Delaware, New Hampshire, New Jersey, and Vermont combined and is home to a rural population of about 164,000 people. Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute is an oncology specialty within the not-for-profit Benefis Health System and operates as an outpatient department in a separate facility on the health system's largest medical campus in Great Falls, Mont.

Oncology services and supportive care are housed under one roof, which allows patients in central Montana to receive multidisciplinary cancer care at one location. Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute is staffed by two radiation oncologists, three medical oncologists, and two advanced practice providers in medical oncology, who are employed by Benefis Health System. The cancer institute recently upgraded its radiation oncology equipment to provide patients stereotactic radio surgery and external beam radio therapy, via a state-of-the-art Varian Edge. The health system works closely with its general surgeons and contracts with independent practitioners in Great Falls who provide surgical oncology services. Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute is certified by the American Society of Clinical Oncology Quality Oncology Practice Initiative for its medical oncology services and is the only cancer program in central Montana to be accredited by the Commission on Cancer. Patients are referred to Benefis Sletten Cancer

Institute by primary care providers or upon diagnosis from the main hospital. A nurse navigator and lay navigator work the front line by helping with referrals as they come in. These navigators are dedicated to working with providers and the cancer care team by screening all new patients to identify their needs up front, which streamlines patient care and triage. A social worker then sits with patients for a small orientation-style meeting during which patients can ask questions. Once a patient's needs are established, the providers, nursing staff, and allied members of the cancer care team work together to deliver seamless patient care. This includes coordinating same-day, back-to-back appointments for tests, consults, and treatment. If needed, nutrition or genetics consults are arranged during patient infusions for patient convenience.

Patient-Centered Care

The Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute was designed to make patients feel comfortable and welcome. A large fireplace and leather furniture help to create a warm waiting area, and throughout the center patients are greeted with soft cream tones and accent walls in earthy tones of green, blue, and purple. The 20-chair infusion suite sits at the east-facing, back end of the building. The nurses' station spans one side of the infusion suite, facing the patients, and is staffed by five full-time oncology-certified nurses who are chemotherapy certified. A dedicated infusion pharmacy is adjacent to the suite and is staffed by a board-certified oncology pharmacist and two pharmacy technicians. Patients can receive treatment in several

areas of the infusion suite and can take advantage of the many supportive areas available. These include areas within the infusion suite that are dedicated to patients' various needs, like a section where they can have small family gatherings, do puzzles, read in a nook, or view a 50-gallon colorful aquarium. In a large solarium located at the back of the suite, patients can experience the benefits of plants, natural light, and the majestic views of Montana's big sky in four infusion chairs. Patients who prefer privacy can receive infusions in curtained-off areas within the suite. The infusion suite is designed to meet many different patient needs, explains Betsy Smith, MS, CGC, a certified genetic counselor at Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute.

In its effort to provide dynamic patient-centered care, Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute ensures that its patients have access to technology. Computers are available in the Resource Center at the front of the building so that patients can email and research their disease. The infusion suite also has iPads for patients to use while receiving treatment. For those who prefer print material, the Resource Center has books and brochures available.

Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute provides its patients a variety of supportive care options. Next to the Resource Center is the Medspa, staffed part-time by a cosmetologist who helps patients with skin care, head shaves, and wig and prosthetic fitting. Patients can also access numerous support services, including social work, genetic counseling and testing, financial navigation, and other services specific to patients'

cultural needs. Within Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute's service area are three American Indian reservations and one federally recognized landless tribe. The Native American population makes up about 7 percent of the institute's patient population. To meet these patients' cultural needs, the health system built a Native American Welcoming Center located near the front entrance of the main hospital, just two blocks from the cancer institute. This unique space is available to Native American patients and their families, a place where they can gather together and participate in various cultural practices, such as a smudging ceremony, where a cleaning smoke bath is created and used to purify the body, aura, and energy. "It's great to have a room dedicated to our Native American population where we can provide that support to their loved ones," explains Smith.

Meeting the Needs of Rural Patients

The cancer institute treats a rural patient population that faces significant financial and travel burdens, often separating patients from their homes and support networks during treatment. Approximately one-fifth of its total patient population must travel more than 100 miles to see their provider and receive treatment, which is often impacted by snowy weather. Many of the cancer institute's patients are also of low socioeconomic status and/or are covered under a form of government insurance, including TriCare, Indian Health Services, Veterans Affairs, Medicare, or Medicaid. To care for patients as close to home as possible, Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute established a joint venture with the Northern Montana Hospital in Havre, Mont. The hospital employs a medical oncologist, and Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute provides radiation oncology services. A radiation oncologist from the institute travels 112 miles at least once a month to see 6 to 12 patients on average for new patient consults and follow-ups. The institute's radiation oncology team works with the cancer care team at Northern Montana Hospital daily and oversees all of its radiation oncology treatments. The institute's radiation oncologists use telemedicine for weekly management visits for patients

receiving radiation treatment when they are not on-site and are also available for follow-ups and consults via telemedicine as needed.

For those patients who must travel to the institute for treatment, Benefis Health System provides the opportunity to stay in two housing facilities. These Gift of Life Housing facilities are on the Benefis Health System campus—one adjacent to the cancer institute and the other next to the main hospital. Patients with short-term stays can take advantage of hotel-style rooms, and those who have longer stays can occupy apartment-style units or use a fully equipped RV hookup outside the facilities. Taking into account both housing facilities and 11 RV hookup sites, all of which are free of charge, a total of 22 rooms are available. Benefis Health System supports the Gift of Life Housing through donations from its foundation and philanthropy by former patients, family members, and the community. "This housing option has actually made treatment possible for a large number of our patients, who otherwise may not have been able to get the care they need," explains Smith.

Technology and Research

Furthering access to quality care in a rural setting, the Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute takes pride in its capacity to make clinical trials and specialized care available to patients. A gynecologic oncologist from the University of Utah visits Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute twice a month to provide consultations and specialized cancer surgeries to patients locally. He also works closely with Benefis Health System's gynecologists and oncologists in ongoing patient care. This partnership was established by a Benefis Health System physician who had prior ties and fellowship experience at the university. Over time the physicians developed a collaborative, informal relationship, which resulted in the ability to provide patients in central Montana access to



specialized care. In turn, Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute refers patients to tertiary centers, including the Huntsman Cancer Institute at the University of Utah.

To establish access to clinical trials, a clinical trial team was formed, which consists of a clinical regulatory research coordinator, a clinical research registered nurse, and a part-time clinical research nurse. The team screens all new patient referrals and those whose cancers recur for potential clinical trial options. The clinical trial team meets with physicians regularly to help identify eligible patients who can be offered participation in trials. The team also participates in tumor boards to educate physicians on new trial options and changes in protocol that might impact patients. Finally, Benefis Sletten Cancer Institute works with the Montana Cancer Consortium to give patients access to a broad range of national clinical trials. About 4 percent of the institute's patients are enrolled in clinical trials annually, and the program has between 80 and 120 trials open for enrollment, which are either nationally sponsored or offered by industry. "What has impressed me the most about the institute is its ongoing commitment to meet and exceed the needs of our patients," explains Smith. 