



Association of Community Cancer Centers

ONCOLOGY ISSUES

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FROM THE EDITOR.....

A Focus on Our Staff

BY SIBEL BLAU, MD



As we enter an era of “rebound” from a harsh, bleak year of COVID-19, most of us have mixed feelings of excitement, hope, fatigue, sadness, and confusion.

This amalgam of conflicting emotions is only compounded by economic challenges in every aspect of our lives. Moreover, the pandemic and resultant public health emergency transformed the way we practice medicine.

As oncologists, we have done our best to care for our patients safely since the onset of COVID-19. This required a huge amount of time and resources to develop and put into practice a wide range of new safety measures. Many oncology practices and cancer programs are now experiencing severe staffing shortages, placing undue burden on existing staff and clinicians. To improve staff retention, teams are being assembled to tackle issues from mundane technical work to strategies for improving employee satisfaction to processes to create and keep a safe work environment. The question of how to pay for these changes and improvements remains a major issue.

At Northwest Medical Specialties, we, too, face challenges from staff stress and exhaustion. To address and overcome these challenges, our management team has made it a priority to bolster the resiliency of our staff. So, what are we doing?

At the start of the public health emergency, our practice implemented a COVID-19 Hardship Fund to help staff. Support came from paid time off donated by staff and financial contributions from managers and clinicians. Today this fund is still available to all staff.

With the understanding that communication is key, we instituted weekly “pod” meetings so that team members can openly talk about issues or ask questions—with an end goal of identifying solutions to those problems or answers to those questions. These meetings improved communication

and allowed staff to get to know each other better. We instituted weekly departmental manager meetings to increase transparency and ensure that all staff receive clear communication about practice changes. This increased awareness from our management team is translating into staff feeling increased appreciation and respect. Our medical director also hosts a monthly town hall. All of these internal communication efforts help our staff to understand and align with our organization’s vision and goals.

We are looking to bolster resiliency in other ways as well. For example, even though staff are extremely busy, we hold intentional training opportunities aimed at improving staff confidence on specific topics and workflows. Other staff take online courses.

To try to balance work schedules and allow more quality time at the office, our staff are often cross-trained and encouraged to cover work for each other. Instituting flexible work schedules and remote work opportunities for non-patient-facing positions has also improved practice morale.

Our management team needs support as well, and our practice provides advance leadership training with a focus on ways to support and interact with direct reports.

Several years ago, our social work team developed a mental health program for patients, and we are now branching this out to include staff. Since the start of the pandemic, social work has sent regular wellness reminders to staff, including information on mental health awareness. As we know, a focus on mental health is key to helping our staff and clinicians recover from the stress and heavy workload they have carried for more than a year now.

If there is a silver lining from this global pandemic, it is that the experience shed light on the innovation and creativity of the oncology workforce. We all learned ways to survive and to pivot into practice transformation that allowed us to continue providing life-saving care to our patients. The cancer community must continue to work together, share our best practices—what works and what does not work—and remember to take moments to breathe and engage in mindfulness to improve our resiliency and help us continue this difficult journey. ☐