

spotlight

San Juan Cancer Center, Montrose, Colo.



Located in Montrose, Colo., and 20 miles from the Black Canyon of Gunnison National Park, San Juan Cancer Center offers community-based oncology and hematology services to a population of 80,000 to 100,000 people. It is the only local provider of radiation oncology, and the closest medical oncology clinic is about 25 miles away.

San Juan Cancer Center is a freestanding facility that was built in 2006, and it is a department of Montrose Regional Health. Located three blocks from Montrose Regional Health Hospital, the cancer center sits within a residential neighborhood and has a dedicated parking lot. Patients can be dropped off at the front doors, or they can park at no extra cost and walk a short distance to the cancer center.

A Suite of Services

San Juan's clinical and non-clinical staff are all employees of Montrose Regional Health, with the exception of its radiation oncologists, who are employed by the Cancer Centers of Colorado at SCL Health St. Mary's Medical Center. All radiation oncology services are offered as a joint venture between Montrose Regional Health, SCL Health in Grand Junction, Colo., and its practicing radiation oncologists. San Juan's radiation oncology department is located on the first floor of the cancer center and is staffed by a full-time radiation oncologist, a part-time radiation oncologist (who travels from Grand Junction twice a week), three radiation therapists, one dosimetrist, two nurses, three registration/billing staff, and a physicist. With the addition of a physicist,

San Juan Cancer Center will begin offering SBRT and other procedures in early 2022. Using one Varian TrueBeam®, the cancer center provides IMRT and IGRT to patients.

San Juan's medical oncology department is located on the second floor of the cancer center. San Juan leadership are proud to have on staff three full-time medical oncologists who have 15 to 20 years of experience each. Each oncologist has one clinic nurse, who manages physician orders, prescriptions, and provides symptom management over the phone. The clinic nurses are slowly transitioning to nurse navigator roles, and each will focus on a specialization in medical oncology (e.g., thoracic, breast, etc.). Next to the medical oncology clinic is the infusion suite and dedicated infusion pharmacy. The infusion suite has nine chairs, including two private rooms that are available to patients, and is staffed by four infusion nurses.

The infusion-dedicated pharmacy—just 10 feet from the infusion suite—gives infusion nurses direct access to the pharmacists who dispense patients' medications. The pharmacists in turn have convenient access to patients during their treatment to help address any adverse events or answer questions. Staffed by one full-time pharmacist, one half-time pharmacist, and one pharmacy tech, the pharmacy orders all medications, mixes chemotherapies, and ensures that treatment regimens are ready for patients before they arrive.

If a patient requires surgical oncology services, San Juan's providers refer them to the general surgeon's office near the hospital. Patients who require more complex

surgeries are referred to Grand Junction (about 60 miles away) or other large medical systems in Denver, Colo. (about 270 miles away), across the heart of the Rocky Mountains.

San Juan staff and Montrose Regional Health are seeking to further their dedication to quality cancer care for patients in the community by pursuing Commission on Cancer accreditation and offering clinical trial opportunities through a partnership with an academic medical center. Both initiatives are under discussion with a desire to begin processes in 2022.

Supportive Care

Because San Juan provides care to a rural population, patients often face long-distance drives to get to their appointments. Harsh Colorado winter weather can further hinder transportation. Knowing this factor can sometimes be a barrier to obtaining care, the cancer center's social worker works closely with local resources and foundations to help patients bridge the gap that insurance cannot. These efforts may include working to book a hotel at a discounted rate or securing financial assistance to cover gas expenses.

San Juan's social worker also assists with insurance prior authorizations, financial advocacy services, and referrals and can help patients with their psychosocial needs. In addition, a dietitian visits the cancer center once a week to offer patients nutrition recommendations, weight gain support, gastrostomy tube assistance, and treatment-related side effect management strategies. These supportive care services are

free to patients, who can self-refer. Montrose Regional Health Hospital also offers a comprehensive rehabilitation program to which oncology patients can be referred by their care team.

A Focus on Lung Health

According to Dean Putt, cancer service line director at Montrose Regional Health, smoking rates in the community are high (about 22 percent). To address the high smoking rates among their patients and to promote cancer screenings, Montrose Regional Health hired a pulmonologist and established a dedicated lung program to find and diagnose lung cancers early. The program is made up of a navigational bronchoscopy unit within the hospital's surgery department and the pulmonologist's lung nodule clinic. Through this clinic, all patients' computed tomography (CT) scans are screened for incidental findings. Using third-party software that is integrated into the hospital's electronic health record, the pulmonologist can see the radiologist's notes and the software will filter out any scans or notes unrelated to a nodule finding. This software will be fully integrated in early 2022.

If patients are found to have a significantly large nodule, nurse navigators will contact patients and schedule them at the weekly nodule clinic. For nodules that appear smaller in size, patients may be referred to the diagnostic imaging and pulmonology clinical team for follow-up lung cancer screening. Low-dose CT screening is also available to a high-risk group as defined by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. "Most patients who are worried that they have lung cancer tend to avoid the screenings," says Putt. "If you just look at all patients who have incidental findings, 8 to 14 percent of them are later diagnosed to be lung cancer (generally at a more treatable early stage), compared to 1 to 2 percent of those going through low-dose CT screening. So, the incidental findings are much more important to track."

Although patients in the nodule clinic are not directed to San Juan Cancer Center until they have a positive biopsy for malignancy, a San Juan medical oncology clinic nurse

works closely with the nodule clinic staff to ensure that patients are followed up with appropriately. The clinic nurse communicates regularly with the nodule clinic nurse navigator, so patients are seamlessly directed from the lung program to the cancer center when necessary.

To further Montrose's lung health efforts, two nurses and a respiratory therapist at Montrose Regional Health received training to become tobacco treatment specialists through the state of Colorado. These staff are working on a hospital-wide tobacco cessation program that will be available to patients who use tobacco and who are admitted, and the cancer center will address those patients who have already been diagnosed with lung cancer, are still smoking, or are receiving treatment. Staff hope to help patients and community members quit smoking through dedicated, long-term support, rather than referring patients to an external resource for help.

San Juan Cancer Center staff—some of whom have been with Montrose Regional Health for more than a decade—are proud to be seasoned employees of the health system. "I've been with five other cancer centers, and this is the best staff as far as the caring that they give to the patients and the ability to work with others on the team," says Putt. "It's remarkable. A small cancer center, like this, has been able to attract quality staff, which in turn gives patients that peace of mind that they're getting really good care." 

