

spotlight

Logan Health, Logan Health Cancer Program, Kalispell, Montana



Northwest Montana is home to one of the fastest growing “small towns” in the state—Kalispell.¹ Within the borders of this mountainous city sits Logan Health, Logan Health Cancer Program. Though healthcare delivery is complex in any setting, this cancer program must meet the needs of a continuous influx of new patients. Montana’s unique population density is another hurdle Logan Health Cancer Program must navigate. The state has approximately 1.2 million inhabitants across 147,040 square miles—making it the fourth largest landmass in the United States. Therefore, developing a dynamic cancer program to deliver high-quality care to a diverse and rural population is vital.

For the last 13 years, Melissa Kaptanian, MD, FACS, has been a breast surgical oncologist at Logan Health Cancer Program. While describing its patient population, Dr. Kaptanian said, “We have a very diverse rural population, so we are really trying to focus

on taking healthcare to people.” The cancer program embodies the American small-town spirit to meet patient’s needs. “It is kind of wonderful small-town America. It is listening, deep roots, and meeting people where they are at,” she explained. “That is how we try to do things.”

Logan Health added its cancer service line in 2020, with Dr. Kaptanian serving as its physician executive. The service line brings together medical and radiation oncology, palliative care, research, genetics, and a breast center. Implementation has helped streamline the health system’s strategic planning and budgeting, as well as unify patients’ experience during their cancer journey. Dr. Kaptanian wagers that care delivery and the patient experience are optimized when there is open and effective communication between all service providers. “It has only been two years,” she said, “but I do not think we would have actually survived COVID-19 without being able to focus on patients’ journey through-

out the health system in the way the cancer service line has allowed us to.” Logan Health Cancer Program is accredited by the Commission on Cancer and National Accreditation Program for Breast Centers.

Multidisciplinary Care in Rural America

Logan Health Cancer Program has small offices closely located to each other on one medical campus. There is a dedicated infusion suite for hematology/oncology treatments that is located near its hematology/oncology offices. It also has an infusion suite for patients to receive non-oncology/hematology treatments in its main hospital—Logan Health Medical Center. This infusion suite serves as an overflow area for hematology/oncology on weekends, during holidays, and in the evenings. Medical oncology is co-located with palliative care and pediatric oncology in one office. Radiation oncology is just across the street, where patients receive treatment from two Varian TrueBeam® 5423s, which operate virtually nonstop throughout the day. Lastly, the breast center, which neighbors a mammography center and surgery suite, is adjacent to the main hospital that houses its main surgery suite.

Oncology infusions are provided to patients at Logan Health Medical Center, as well as in two other partner hospitals—Cabinet Peaks Medical Center in Libby and St. Luke Community Healthcare in Ronan, Mont. These hospitals administer patients their chemotherapy treatments in conjunction with Logan Health physicians to meet patients where they are at. “Both of these programs are an hour away from us,” Dr. Kaptanian said. “It has been exciting for me to watch our cancer program expand and tell people that they do not have to drive an hour away for their treatment.”



The cancer program also partners with physicians and private practices in the community. “Our radiologists, anesthesiologists, pathologists, and a few of our gynecologists are independent groups and fantastic partners,” Dr. Kaptanian shared. Logan Health employs two surgical, five medical, and two radiation oncologists, as well as four palliative care specialists. Dr. Kaptanian believes that collaboration and teamwork are bolstered by having all of the medical providers employed by the same entity. “We share one medical record and one medical staff model,” Dr. Kaptanian said. “I think that is very helpful for our patients.”

New patients are usually discovered through the health system’s cancer screening efforts or primary care services. To meet the needs of the influx of people migrating into the city, two new patient navigators were hired to track down new patients’ health records, including where patients are coming from and what services are needed. Once patients are identified, a nurse navigator is assigned to them and their treatment plan begins. A multidisciplinary cancer conference meets every week to discuss improvements that can be made to patients’ treatment plans. Once patients complete treatment, they are transitioned into the survivorship program under the guidance of an oncology social worker.

Logan Health hosts multiple initiatives for patients without a primary care provider. “In the breast center, we realized that patients were not getting mammograms. Not because they did not want them, but because they did not have a primary care doctor to order the test for them,” Dr. Kaptanian said. As a result, a process was developed that allows patients to order their own mammograms, with an accelerated care mechanism in place if an abnormality is discovered. Dr. Kaptanian hopes to replicate this efficiency in screening efforts for other cancers in the service line. “You try one thing and figure out what works and roll it to other areas of the cancer program,” she explained.

To further assist individuals in accessing primary care, the health system launched the One Call initiative. “It is maddening for a patient to call around practice to practice and be told that they are not accepting new patients,” Dr. Kaptanian said. “With the One

Call system, patients can phone and find out which providers are accepting new patients.”

Navigation is Key

According to Dr. Kaptanian, “ACCC has some of the best navigation practices, and we have really benefitted from them as we try to constantly improve our navigation program.” In a bid to improve patients’ access to healthcare, the cancer program launched a mobile mammography unit. “We put a mammographer, sonography technologist, and DEXA [bone density] scanning onto a mobile coach and go to small towns,” Dr. Kaptanian explained. “Women in those towns can have their scans come to them, instead of patients coming to us.” This practice has had positive effects on the cancer program’s early detection rate and patient satisfaction. “When a patient’s needs are conveniently met, it helps them understand that Logan Health is here for them,” Dr. Kaptanian said. “It keeps patients in our system, so we can take care of them from diagnosis to survivorship.”


For patients traveling longer distances to reach the cancer program, a network of oncology and non-oncology nurse navigators works together to ensure that each patient visit is maximized. “We want to make sure that these patients have multiple specialists and tests on the same day,” Dr. Kaptanian said. This focus on patient-centered care and a dedication to being sociologically imaginative has served the cancer program well, especially when delivering care to distinctive segments of its diverse patient population.

Alternative Medicine in Cancer Care

The Pacific Northwest is also a unique area of the country when looking at healthcare philosophy. “Patients here have a different take on traditional medicine sometimes,” Dr. Kaptanian said, adding that patients “seem

to be more interested in herbal medicine, naturopathy, and homeopathy.” Due to the prevalence of this worldview in the community, coupled with the possibility of patients seeking alternative medicine providers without informing their care team, a naturopathic oncologist was hired. “Dr. Lynn Troy has been working with us for some years, and she sees patients who have questions about herbalism, homeopathy, or alternative medicine,” Dr. Kaptanian said. “I think it is the most innovative thing we do.”

The cancer program also offers massage, acupuncture, and guided imagery services to patients to support them in their cancer journey. In recognition of the importance of mental health in a patients’ life, an increased emphasis has been placed in providing mental healthcare to patients.

Fueled by the ethos of small-town America, patient relationships are an important part of Logan Health Cancer Program’s mission. “Every provider in the program will always speak up for their patients,” Dr. Kaptanian said. “We are big enough to have the things you need and small enough to care.” 

Reference

1. Dietrich E. Montana’s fastest-growing city last year? It wasn’t Bozeman. Published March 30, 2022. Accessed September 29, 2022. montanafreepress.org/2022/03/30/kalispell-growing-faster-than-bozeman-census-population

