

# spotlight

## CoxHealth, Hulston Cancer Center Springfield, Missouri



**C**oxHealth, Hulston Cancer Center was the first approved community hospital comprehensive cancer program in Springfield, Mo.—providing multidisciplinary care to more than one million patients across 22 counties. The cancer center and its satellite location offer radiation and medical oncology services to patients in its communities, in addition to infusion services. CoxHealth, Hulston Cancer Center is accredited by the American College of Surgeons and the American College of Radiology.

In describing the vision for the oncology service line, Abe Abdalla, MD, medical director for Oncology Services at CoxHealth, said, “Our vision is to provide comprehensive, compassionate, convenient, and state-of-the-art cancer care to our patients.” Missouri is commonly referred to as the “show me state,” and in true Missouri fashion, CoxHealth, Hulston Cancer Center does not simply talk about that vision, it shows this to each patient who presents to the cancer center.

While an expansive catchment area can pose a significant logistical challenge for most cancer programs in the United States, Hulston Cancer Center staff must overcome a greater hurdle: smoking. At \$0.17 per pack of 20 cigarettes, Missouri has the lowest cigarette tax in the U.S.—an amount much lower than the national average of \$2.14.<sup>1,2</sup> “There is sufficient data that establishes a direct correlation between tobacco tax and tobacco usage,” said Ben Morris, assistant director at the Branson Cancer Center, the sole satellite location for Hulston Cancer Center.

Due to the prevalence of smoking in Missouri, the cancer center provides care to a high number of patients with lung cancer. To ensure that these patients receive comprehensive, equitable, and quality care, Hulston Cancer Center leadership ensured a lung cancer navigation program was one of the first incorporated into its service line. This navigation program has since expanded, exemplifying a commitment to delivering state-of-the-art cancer care to patients, including construction of a new infusion center at Hulston Cancer Center.

### Delivering Patient-Centered Care

“A year ago, we moved into our new infusion center to accommodate a growing patient population,” said Michelle Jackson, nurse manager of outpatient oncology at CoxHealth, Hulston Cancer Center. “We took input from staff and patients. The patients wanted more bathrooms, more natural light, and their own television. They did not want to feel like they were in a hospital.” While the new infusion center at Hulston Cancer Center was in the design process, 15 patients had the chance to look at the architectural designs and provide feedback before construction began. According to staff, each patient was committed to helping CoxHealth make a better infusion center that met patient and the staff needs.

Situated on the second floor of Hulston Cancer Center, the infusion center houses 35 infusion bays, each equipped with recliners, a curtain for patient privacy, and a chair for a caregiver. Five private rooms are available, two of which are negative air flow rooms for immunocompromised

patients. The infusion center is staffed by 9 to 10 chemotherapy-credentialed registered nurses each day. In addition, three certified nurse assistants help with patient care.

“Our full-service pharmacy is centrally located on the second floor, so we have direct access to the three dedicated mixing pharmacists,” Jackson explained. These pharmacists can also complete rounds, making connections with patients during treatment and helping with any concerns they may have.

Additionally, the infusion center now includes a hope and healing garden—a space of which Jeff Robinson, assistant director of radiation at CoxHealth, Hulston Cancer Center is proud. “If anybody is going to use it more so, it would be infusion patients, who are required to be there for hours at a time,” he said.

Robinson describes the infusion center as completely oriented to patients and staff. “Everybody needs to be in a good space,” he said. “It has helped the morale of staff and brightened the patient’s perspective.”

### A Robust Service Line

Robinson also considers the adaptive radiation therapy services the cancer center offers as a major accomplishment. Radiation therapy staff include two radiation oncologists, eight radiation therapists, four physicists, three dosimetrists, four oncology certified registered nurses, and several welcoming support staff. Also offered is SRS, SBRT, IMRT, IGRT, Prostate Seed and breast and gynecological HDR brachytherapy services.



The Gynecological Oncology Clinic is located on the seventh floor of Hulston Cancer Center and houses the practice of three gynecologic oncologists and one nurse practitioner. CoxHealth hematology and medical oncology, also located at the Hulston Cancer Center, is home to three medical oncologists, a nurse practitioner, a physician assistant, four nurses, seven certified medical assistants, one medical lab technician, and six medical secretaries. Providers are full-time and employed by CoxHealth, Hulston Cancer Center—as are the two physicians located at the Branson Cancer Center.

Located 35 miles south of Springfield is the Branson Cancer Center, which opened in 2008. Here, patients can access medical and radiation oncology services, as well as oncology and non-oncology infusion services close to home. This cancer center is staffed by a radiation oncology physician, a medical oncology physician, three radiation therapists, a dosimetrist, a physicist, and several registered nurses, as well as office support staff. Branson Cancer Center includes 10 chairs in its infusion center and 1 private room for patients. A dedicated pharmacy is embedded in the infusion center and is staffed by nine registered nurses. The primary difference between both CoxHealth cancer centers are the subspecialties, such as neurosurgery, surgical oncology, and colorectal surgery, which patients can access only in Springfield.

### Patient Advocacy, Navigation, and Support Services

The advocacy program at CoxHealth,


Hulston Cancer Center owes its origin to an endowment received in 2002. “At that time, this [patient advocacy] was all kind of new, and we had some donors that were interested in making our cancer program cutting edge,” said Autumn Bragg, oncology manager at CoxHealth, Hulston Cancer Center. “We were able to staff two full-time patient advocates solely through that fund.” Since then, the advocacy program has grown to include five patient advocates, all of whom are social workers. Four are located at Hulston Cancer Center and one at Branson Cancer Center. “Our patient advocates focus on the logistical barriers to treatment that patients may encounter,” Bragg said. They can assist patients with issues related to transportation, lodging, and treatment-related costs.

The cancer center also employs five nurse navigators—four of whom service Hulston Cancer Center. Three of these nurse navigators are dedicated to a specific disease—gynecologic; gastrointestinal; and lung, head, and neck cancers—with the final nurse navigator serving a general role to assist all other patients. The single nurse navigator at Branson Cancer Center serves a general role, dedicated to any patients seen at this location.

Hulston Cancer Center employs a part-time dietitian who receives patients through physician referrals. “The dietitian does a lot in tube feeding education—making sure that patients, who have feeding tubes, understand how to feed themselves,” Bragg explained. In addition, patients can access genetic counseling services, pastoral

care, and pet therapy. “The latter is hugely popular,” Bragg said. “Our patients and staff love it.”

### Clinical Research

While many rural cancer programs struggle to offer clinical trial opportunities to patients, CoxHealth, Hulston Cancer Center has made this a priority in delivering high-quality, comprehensive cancer care. Its center for research allows patients to enroll in pharmaceutical trials for gynecologic, medical, and radiation oncology studies. This center is part of the CoxHealth healthcare system and consists of a director and four oncology-dedicated staff. Another research arm of CoxHealth is the Cancer Research for the Ozarks. This National Cancer Institute (NCI) Community Oncology Research Program is rooted in the spirit of collaboration with other health systems in southwest Missouri. It works to bring cancer clinical trials to patients who present to the cancer center by adopting evidence-based practices that contribute to improving patient outcomes and addressing health disparities. 

### References

1. American Lung Association. State of tobacco control: Missouri. Accessed March 1, 2023. <https://www.lung.org/research/sotc/state-grades/missouri>
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