

spotlight

Iverson Memorial Hospital, Meredith and Jeannie Ray Cancer Center, Laramie, Wyoming



For the residents of Laramie, Wyo., there is only one source of local cancer care—Iverson Memorial Hospital, Meredith and Jeannie Ray Cancer Center. When Meredith Ray was diagnosed with prostate cancer in the 90s, he and his wife Jeannie were forced to travel 60 miles south of their hometown to Fort Collins, Colo., to receive treatment. “They drove down there five days a week, and the highway to Fort Collins [U.S. Route 287] is one of the most dangerous highways in the United States,” said Amy Smith, director of Iverson Memorial Hospital, Meredith and Jeannie Ray Cancer Center. “That highway has more accidents than any other two-lane road in Wyoming.”

Determined to ensure that patients with cancer in Laramie did not encounter a similar barrier, Meredith Ray and his wife Jeannie began collaborating with the administrative staff at Iverson Memorial Hospital to develop a cancer center. “We live in such a rural area that it so hard for patients to get care. I am grateful that Meredith and Jeannie Ray took the first step to get a cancer program in our town,” Smith said. “Thinking that we didn’t even have a cancer center before that—I can’t even wrap my head around it.”

The Meredith and Jeannie Ray Cancer Center is now one of eight in Wyoming. Built as a single-level facility, it is connected to the Iverson Memorial Hospital via a hallway—allowing patients with cancer to access hematology, medical oncology, and radiation oncology services.

Delivering High-Quality Cancer Care

“When patients enter our building’s main lobby, it branches off, so they can go directly into the infusion suite, medical oncology clinic, or radiation oncology clinic,” Smith explained. “Our linear accelerator is right off the front entrance.”

The cancer center strives to see patients within seven days of their referral, which involves coordinating care with a hybrid-set of staff. The radiation oncologist lives in Casper, Wyo., which is a three-hour drive from Laramie, and is onsite once a week. Two physicists and one dosimetrist are also present once a week, working remotely from Casper on all other days. Finally, the radiation oncology clinic is staffed full-time by a nurse and 2 radiation therapists, as the clinic offers brachytherapy, IMRT, SBRT, and SRS treatments to patients.

Patients in medical oncology can

receive outpatient infusion treatments. The cancer center’s infusion suite sees an average of 50 patients a day, using 9 chairs. It is staffed by 5 nurses and 1 patient care technician.

“The walls of the infusion suites are decorated with art from Wyoming,” Smith shared. “Our rooms are private bays with glass doors, heated and massage seats, and televisions.”

The cancer center also staffs 1 oncology clinical pharmacist, a medical oncologist, and an internal medicine provider—each of whom are supported by a nurse and patient care technician. All staff, except the radiation oncologist, are employed by Iverson Memorial Hospital.

To further treat patients’ disease, the cancer center implemented a nurse navigation program, and a nurse navigator was hired to assist patients with all cancer types. According to Smith, approximately





25 percent of the patients who present to the center are uninsured or underinsured. As such, a financial navigation program was also implemented to assist with patients' financial needs. Their goal is to have every patient meet with the financial navigator prior to beginning treatment, and Smith hopes this practice will ensure patients do not experience financial toxicity. Further, patients have access to two support groups, one of which is dedicated to those with advanced-stage breast cancer. Patients also have access to dietitian services, advanced care planning, and massage coupons.

Through Jeannie's Boutique, a grant-funded program, the cancer center offers specialty services and products to all patients with cancer at no cost. This program offers wigs, head coverings, prosthetic fittings, bras, and lymphedema sleeves. "Jeannie's Boutique was designed with the idea to help cancer patients gracefully adapt to life during and after cancer," Smith said. "With a wide variety of products available to choose from, patient's will be able to find the best look for them." All supportive care services are free and available to patients through self-referral.

Developing Strategic Partnerships with the Community

For rural centers like the Meredith and Jeannie Ray Cancer Center, developing strategic partnerships with the community is key to delivering comprehensive cancer care locally to patients. One of those partnerships

is with the University of Colorado Denver – Anschutz Medical Campus. "A lot of the doctors at Anschutz Medical Campus have Wyoming licenses now, and so they're able to consult with our patients via telehealth," Smith said.

Through this partnership, residents of Wyoming can access clinical trials, bone marrow and stem cell transplants, and treatment for acute leukemia. This collaboration allows staff at the Meredith and Jeannie Ray Cancer Center access to tumor boards. "That partnership was developed within the last five years, and it continues to grow," Smith said. "When you have doctors in those big clinics, they don't really have the confidence in rural clinics to provide the care they want for their patients. So, it took a lot of persistence for them to have the confidence that they have in us now."

Further, the cancer center maintains a fundraising partnership with the Wyoming Breast Cancer Initiative. This partnership provides financial resources to breast cancer patients at the center.

Addressing Access Barriers to Care

Though grants with the American Cancer Society, the cancer center provides gas cards, as well as travel and hotel vouchers, to patients in need of this assistance. Additionally, the cancer center built a guest house a few blocks away that is made available to its patients, who must stay locally for treatment, at no cost. "When patients are

coming for radiation treatments, they often must stay in town the whole week. The guest house gives them a place to stay and not have to pay for a hotel all week," Smith said. "We are always looking for programs that we can partner with to help our patients with their expenses."

While development of the Meredith and Jeannie Ray Cancer Center resolved many patient access issues, it did not eliminate them all. Smith surmises that travel to and from treatment is still one of the greatest barriers patients with cancer face in Wyoming, with some still having to travel several hours to get treatment. "The cost of fuel, as well, and the time they have to be away from work is a huge burden," Smith said. "In addition, oral medications are often unable to be delivered on time with the remote areas our patients live in."

According to Smith, harsh winters also prevent patients from receiving their medication. "Winter is exceptionally long here—the snow starts in September and does not end until May," she explained. "This past year, the interstate was closed for over a week due to winter conditions and accidents."

The staff at Meredith and Jeannie Ray Cancer Center understand the effects of this problem more than most. Therefore, they ensure that every patient who walks through their doors receives compassionate, patient-centered care. The kind of care that is unique to cancer programs and practices in small towns, where everyone knows everyone. 📺