

# spotlight

## Highlands Oncology North Arkansas



As the only diamond producing state in the United States, Arkansas is home to many gems. Among them is one of the largest physician-owned cancer programs in the country—Highlands Oncology. Established in 1996, the founding physicians sought to bring comprehensive cancer care to Northwest Arkansas, so that patients would not have to leave the comfort of home to receive cutting-edge treatment. Highlands Oncology Group is a multidisciplinary cancer center featuring medical, radiation, and surgical oncology; supportive care; and an oncology rehabilitation program. Further, they have a full-service infusion center in each clinic, as well as state of the art diagnostic imaging, a cancer

assessment and risk education clinic, a free lung cancer screening program, a center for chest care, and a robust research program that participates in over 100 active clinical trials.

### Access: The Crown Jewel

Access is at the core of Highland's founding philosophy. The practice currently has 5 locations in Northwest and Northcentral Arkansas. "Before opening the flagship location in August 2020, we were spread around in a variety of different small buildings. Administration would be in 1 building and the business office would be in another building, therapists in another, and so forth," said Jeff Hunnicutt, CEO at Highlands Oncology Group. "So, the

level of teamwork and collaboration has improved because you have people who are just down the hall, as opposed to a mile away or so." According to Hunnicutt, this location ensures the cancer program is well placed to accommodate the demands of future patients as the population of the state grows. "It gives us plenty of space for expansion in the future. As this area continues to grow so rapidly, we want to make sure that we were staying ahead of that trend and accommodate that growth."

Developing and maintaining strategic partnerships designed to improve cancer care continues to be a major part of the program's model. This spirit of collaboration fueled the development of their location in Mountain Home. The multi-story, 33,000-square-foot facility, which opened in May 2023, is the product of a partnership between Baxter Regional Medical Center and Highlands Oncology Group. The center is located adjacent to the hospital, and this allows patients with cancer to access inpatient treatment services.

Although patients can self-refer, the majority of the Highland Oncology's referrals come through individual physician practices. When patients walk through the doors of their Springdale facility, they will find radiation oncology and imaging services on the first floor. The infusion suites are located on the second floor and contain 43 infusion chairs which are staffed by 18 nurses. The location at Rogers adopts a similar layout, with an infusion suite equipped with 37 chairs and staffed by 20 nurses.

Their Fayetteville and Mountain Home locations have 20 and 24 chairs and are staffed by 13 and 9 nurses, respectively. Further, there is a dedicated retail and sterile compounding pharmacy at each location. The radiation and



medical oncology departments in the Rogers and Fayetteville clinics are staffed by 4 medical physicists and a team of dosimetrists.

The cancer program offers a range of robust treatment options including external beam radiation only using photons or electrons with a range of different modalities: 3D, IMRT/VMAT, SBRT, and SRS/SRT. In addition, patients have access to surface-guided radiation therapy (SGRT), deep inspiration breath hold, atypical partial breast irradiation, and image-guided radiation therapy. Highlands Oncology also provides patients with breast cancer access to the DigniCap® Scalp Cooling System, a US Food and Drug Administration approved computerized cooling unit that reduces hair loss from certain chemotherapy treatments.

### Center For Chest Care

In 1999, Highlands Oncology Group launched its Center for Chest Care—the brainchild of a few local physicians eager to improve the diagnosis and treatment of cancers in the lung and chest. It was the first community-based, multidisciplinary chest cancer clinic in the US and remains the longest, continuously active multidisciplinary lung cancer clinic in the country.

In October 2020, the cancer program decided to incorporate other cancer types into the program. Each month, it hosts over 30 multidisciplinary clinics or after-hours medical conferences which include diagnostic radiologists, medical oncologists, pathologists, pulmonologists, radiation oncologists, thoracic surgeons, breast surgeons, neurosurgeons, and urologic surgeons. The clinics also include colorectal surgeons, oncology trained head and neck surgeons, research coordinators, genetic counselors, patient navigators, social workers, a registered dietitian, and tobacco treatment specialists. This initiative allows multiple specialties to be present in a single place, thus facilitating real-time collaboration for the development of comprehensive, timely, personalized treatment plans for patients. Valmarie Blasucci, a former patient at the program who was diagnosed with lung cancer, attests to the efficacy of this model.

“When we came down and talked to all the doctors at the Center for Chest Care, I don’t

think we even wanted to go and get a second opinion anywhere else. We knew what we were going to do in 1 day. I mean, with the 7 of them, that would be better than us [having] to go to 7 different doctors,” she said. According to Blasucci the program made her feel welcome and ensured she received her lung cancer screening early. “If I hadn’t had the lung screening done and taken care of myself, I wouldn’t have been around for the birth of my great-grandson,” she said. “This little guy is the world. Truthfully, I don’t have a bucket list. I’m just glad to be alive every day.”

Blasucci’s story is just one of many. According to Hunnicutt, the cancer program screens nearly 4,000 patients a year. “It is completely free to the patients, but it allows us to reach people who may have a higher chance of getting cancer and may not know anything about it at the time of the actual scan,” he explained. “It allows us to find some of those in advance.”

### Clinical Trials Close to Home

Thaddeus Beck, MD, a founding member of Highlands Oncology, expressed his desire to be involved in clinical trials from the beginning. His intellectual curiosity and desire to make a difference in patient outcomes was a driving

force in the creation of the Research program at Highlands. As medical director, Dr. Beck created one of the largest and most successful community-based clinical trial programs in the country. At any given time, he oversees over 120 active clinical trials, 30 physicians, advanced practice providers, and data managers. Even with this load, Dr. Beck still takes the time to sit



with his patients, draw up a plan, and ensure that they understand and are prepared for the journey ahead. He uses his exceptional expertise and years of experience to hand pick clinical trials he believes will be relevant and helpful for the patients in this community.

Connecting patients with advanced clinical trial services is an important part of the cancer program's mission. "A lot of people don't know what a robust research program we have here in Northwest Arkansas," Hunnicutt said. "Frequently, patients who are diagnosed with cancer immediately start thinking about looking outside the region for an innovative clinical trial. Then they are redirected back to us because we have the same trial right here in Northwest Arkansas." Hunnicutt takes great pride in being able to deliver innovative medicine and treatment to people close to home. In doing so, the program offers a beacon of hope for patients with cancer in Arkansas, working to ensure they receive the best outcomes. A fitting commitment, for in a state full of diamonds, only the best and brightest shine. 📺

