

A Purpose-Driven Visit to Puerto Rico

BY DOUGLAS FLORA, MD, LSSBB, FACCC

Marking its 50th anniversary, the Association of Cancer Care Centers (ACCC) finds itself at a significant crossroads, commemorating a history rich with advancements in oncology while looking forward to a future filled with potential. This golden jubilee is more than a moment of celebration; it is a reaffirmation of our deep-seated commitment to ensuring access, advocacy, education, and equity in cancer care across all communities. Our network spans over 2,100 member programs, ranging from small practices to comprehensive cancer centers, embodying a collective strength and diversity that drives our mission towards a future where equitable cancer care is a universal reality.

A Purpose-Driven Visit to Puerto Rico

This year, ACCC's leadership journeyed to Puerto Rico, aiming to connect with pioneering institutions and learn from their experiences in providing exceptional care under challenging circumstances. In Puerto Rico, a territory where 3.2 million Hispanic citizens reside, with an additional 5.8 million Puerto Ricans living in the mainland US, the landscape of cancer care is uniquely comprehensive, spanning private, federal, and public health systems. Facilities such as the Veterans Hospital, Hospital Oncológico Dr. Isaac González Martínez, Auxilio Cancer Center, and HIMA Cancer Center, along with the Centro Comprensivo de Cáncer de la Universidad de Puerto Rico (University of Puerto Rico Comprehensive Cancer Center), highlight the region's commitment to oncologic excellence.



“The ACCC delegation site visit continues to reap rewards. From this visit, I connected my colleague, Yhana Chavis, DO, a PGY3 radiation oncology resident, with Dr. Padilla and others I met in San Juan. As a result, Dr. Chavis will be working with a team of radiation oncologists on a rotation in Puerto Rico.”

DAVID PENBERTHY, MD, MBA
ACCC PRESIDENT, 2022-2023



Despite facing economic and systemic challenges, Puerto Rico's health care professionals maintain standards on par with the largest cancer programs in the US, exemplifying remarkable expertise and dedication. However, the journey to provide consistent, accessible care is fraught with obstacles, including a fragmented health care system and the lingering effects of Hurricane Maria's devastation in 2017. Yet, the resilience and collective effort to overcome these challenges are truly inspiring.

An ACCC delegation (left) had the fantastic opportunity to tour facilities in San Juan, including the Centro Comprensivo de Cáncer de la Universidad de Puerto Rico. The tours revealed a

profound dedication to patients—from cutting-edge offerings like phase 1 clinical trials, PET/CT imaging, da Vinci robotic surgery, and comprehensive radiation oncology, to grassroots community outreach spanning the entire island.

Innovative Collaborations Leading the Way

The establishment of PanOncology Trials in 2018, in partnership with Hospital Oncológico Dr. Isaac González Martínez, represents a significant stride toward expanding clinical trial access in Puerto Rico. This collaboration has not only increased the availability of clinical trials but has also fostered a network of medical professionals dedicated to transforming patient care across the island. With units now in Mayagüez, Cayey, Dorado, and San Juan, and plans for further expansion, PanOncology exemplifies a successful model for decentralizing clinical trials, ensuring that innovative treatments are accessible to a broader patient population.

We extend our deepest gratitude to Marcia Cruz-Correa, MD, PhD, AGAF, FASGE, (bottom right picture, far right) and her team for their invaluable contributions to cancer care in Puerto Rico. Their work with PanOncology and the broader oncology community stands as a testament to what can be achieved through dedication, innovation, and a commitment to serving all patients with the highest standards of care. Their efforts are a source of inspiration for ACCC and its members as we strive to fulfill our mission.

The insights gained from this visit have profoundly impacted our understanding and approach to cancer care advocacy and delivery. Witnessing firsthand the seamless integration of high-quality care, advanced research, and community outreach in Puerto Rico has provided us with a clearer vision of how to address the challenges faced by patients with cancer and their health care providers. It underscores the importance of fostering collaborations that extend beyond traditional boundaries, ensuring that every patient—regardless of their geographic location or socioeconomic status—has access to the best possible treatments and support.

Looking to the Future

The example set by our colleagues in Puerto Rico will continue to guide and inspire our efforts. Their ability to provide world-class



cancer care amidst economic challenges and natural disasters is a powerful reminder of the resilience and potential within the oncology community. It encourages us to think creatively, act compassionately, and work tirelessly to break down barriers to care.

In this moment of reflection, celebration, and renewed purpose, ACCC is more committed than ever to advancing its mission. Our journey to Puerto Rico is just one step in a broader endeavor to ensure that cancer care is defined by its excellence, inclusivity, and impact on patients' lives. We are invigorated by the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead and are dedicated to continuing our work with the same passion and dedication that have characterized ACCC for the past 50 years.

As we move forward, let us carry the lessons and inspirations from Puerto Rico with us, working together to shape a future where every individual facing cancer can do so with the highest level of support, care, and hope. Our journey toward improving cancer care for all is ongoing, and together we can make a significant difference in the lives of patients, families, and communities worldwide.

ACCC invites all members and the broader cancer care community to join us in this vital mission. Together, we can build on the foundation laid by pioneering efforts in Puerto Rico and beyond, striving for a world where the intersection of love and science defines the cancer care experience for everyone.

“The cancer care teams [in Puerto Rico] have worked hard to be trustworthy to their patients and communities, and it shows. The community is their advocate and raises significant funds to support the cancer program and the expansion of cancer services. There is much to be learned from—and be inspired by—our incredible colleagues in Puerto Rico.”

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