

# spotlight

## Central Care Cancer Center, Kansas



**P**roviding high-quality, community-based cancer care to patients across Kansas and western Missouri, Central Care Cancer Center has reimaged rural-based oncology to make it the equal of its academic- and urban-based competitors. Earning accreditation from the American College of Radiology and certification from the American Society of Clinical Oncology's Quality Oncology Practice Initiative is evidence of the high-quality of care patients at Central Care Cancer Center experience.

In 1990, Claudia Perez-Tamayo, MD, FACR, FACRO, founded this private practice along with her husband, Alfredo Lopez, who serves as the cancer center's chief executive officer. "When I first came to Kansas, I saw that there was a lot of opportunity to grow," Dr. Perez-Tamayo says. "I thought, why do you need to be traveling when you are sick with cancer? Wouldn't it be nice if we had a [cancer] center close to home that can provide the best care that there is?"

Since its inception, Central Care has grown to include 13 freestanding clinics that



Claudia Perez-Tamayo, MD, FACR, FACRO

are all located next to local hospital sites throughout Kansas and western Missouri. This structure allows the practice to offer comprehensive oncology care, including services (e.g., lab, radiology, imaging) provided in partnership with the local hospitals near which the clinics are located.

### Standardization is Key

Central Care has standardized its available services and staffing model to ensure that all patients receive treatment and supportive care services at the clinic closest to their homes. Due to the geographical sprawl of the practice, staff are connected through the electronic health record and access the same patient charts. Staff collaborate on every treatment plan through a peer-review process to make certain individual treatment plans result in the best patient outcomes. Patient education is prioritized before treatment begins. Providers have access to conference rooms that contain anatomical models and virtual tools that they can use to demonstrate to patients and their families where in the body their disease is located and how its placement or treatment may provoke specific side effects.

Medical and radiation oncology each have their own entrance in every Central Care clinic location, where front-desk staff greet and check-in patients. Staffing structures for medical and radiation oncology are also standardized across all Central Care's clinics. At least one medical oncologist, one radiation oncologist, front-desk staff, medical scribes, nurse practitioners, a financial counselor, and nursing staff are on site at each location.

Radiation oncology also employs a therapist, dosimetrist, and physicist in each clinic who provide IGRT, IMRT, SRT, SBRT, SRS, and brachytherapy. Medical oncology employs additional nursing staff (i.e., infusion nurses and clinical trial nurses) who support the specialty.

The medical oncology clinic is made up of an infusion suite and a dedicated pharmacy in which infusion nurses compound chemotherapies on site. A nursing station is located at the front of each infusion suite, so staff can view all patients as they receive treatment. The size of each infusion suite is often dependent on the size of a given clinic's location; suites can include between 8 to 30 chairs, and private rooms are available at some Central Care locations. To further accommodate each clinic location's patient volume needs, infusion suites are customizable—more chairs and pumps can be brought in when necessary—and infusion nurses can travel if patient volumes increase at any location.

Central Care offers surgical oncology services through a network of surgeons from its local partner hospitals and specialists in the surrounding communities. "Wherever specialists are located, we work to provide the best care for our patients and to keep a streamlined [patient] chart so that at any moment, if a problem arises, prompt care may be administered," says LeAnn Powers, the marketing director at Central Care Cancer Center. The practice also offers financial counseling, genetic counseling, social work, clinical trial participation, wigs and prosthetics, chaplain support, and nutritional services to patients at their local clinics. Other supportive care services (e.g.,

support groups, physical therapy) are offered through local hospitals, depending on the hospital's service capacity. Regardless of where patients access these services, all are free to patients, who may also self-refer.

### Serving Middle America

Because Central Care's locations are scattered throughout the middle of the United States, some patients may still have to travel long distances to receive their treatment. Founded on a mission of bringing patients quality cancer care close to their homes, Central Care offers several options to patients if they are unable to travel due to lack of access to transportation or physical inability. Staff coordinate ride shares with other patients who are treated in the same location, and they are happy to schedule appointments when most convenient for patients to travel. Additionally, patients can take advantage of discounted rates for several motels and RV campgrounds in local communities.

Some patients at Central Care's locations are migrant workers who work in the large agricultural or meat-packing industry in rural regions. These patients may be a single mom with no insurance or a man just laid off from work. Regardless of a patient's circumstances, Central Care staff take pride in their ability to provide oncology care without turning any patient away, irrespective of citizenship or insurance status. Furthermore, Central Care offers bilingual services at many of its locations, so non-native English speakers can better understand their treatment and care.

Medicare beneficiaries make up a large percentage of Central Care's patient population. These patients often experience

financial difficulties when they are faced with the "donut hole" (a Medicare Part D coverage gap) that requires them to take full responsibility for any prescription drug costs after they reach their Part D plan limit. To help keep patients out of this gap, Central Care's financial counselors proactively identify patients covered by Medicare who are underinsured and help them apply to available financial assistance resources. Multiple financial counselors work in each of Central Care's locations.

### Redefining Rural-Based Cancer Care

Central Care offers its patients Phase III clinical trials through its partnership with the National Cancer Institute Community Oncology Research Program. Through its dedicated nursing staff, Central Care screens all patients for clinical trial eligibility. Each Central Care location is staffed by one clinical trial nurse, who screens patients, answers questions, and provides information to qualifying patients.

The practice has also long offered telehealth visits to reduce patient travel times, increase care quality and efficiencies, and improve access to other specialties. Its telehealth offerings began before COVID-19 and have since expanded. Through telehealth, staff can connect with larger academic facilities and their specialists.

Follow-up visits, chemotherapy education, genetic counseling, hematology visits, and tobacco cessation counseling are all offered to patients via telehealth. It is through this vast connection and passion that Central Care staff truly deliver on the practice's mission. "We face limitations, but we go out of our way, beyond the call of duty, to call centers across the world to find the best course of care," says Dr. Perez-Tamayo. "The institution doesn't treat you; it's the people."

