

Health & Hospitals

Patients find convenience in local cancer-care centers

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QUINCY — Dr. Walt Kagan has watched the focus of cancer care change over two decades. And it has steadily moved from big city teaching hospitals to patients' neighborhoods.

"When I started practicing 20 years ago, a lot of cancer care was done in the hospital," Kagan said. "There really has been a dramatic change."

Kagan and other area oncology physicians say the change has resulted in rapid growth of community cancer-care centers, such as the Quincy-based Commonwealth Hematology-Oncology. Kagan, president of the medical group, said it has grown from a small practice into a network of 20 physicians and approximately 80 nurses, lab technicians and other staff in eight offices in Greater Boston, as well as at 15 affiliated clinics and hospitals across Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire.

The result is thousands of cancer patients in and around Boston's can receive medical and radiation therapy as close to their homes as their supermarkets and dry cleaners.

Kagan said the change from hospital-based oncology care to community-based care is partly by design and partly because of the nature of modern cancer treatment. Most medical experts now say patients do better if quality health care is available near their homes.

"Good care needs to be close to people," Kagan said. "A lot of our patients work, so they have to come in during their lunch hour or at the end of the day on the way home. Some are single mothers who really need to work in order to keep their health insurance and earn money for their families."

Most modern cancer treatment, about 95 percent, can be administered on a community practice level, Kagan said. While physicians at his practice do not perform complicated procedures such as bone marrow transplants, they can provide complete care for patients with colon, breast, lung, and other common cancers. That contrasts sharply with 15 years ago, when cancer diagnoses came with long hospital stays and frequent hospital visits.

The technology of cancer treatment has advanced dramatically, which has minimized side effects and made it easier for patients to manage the disease without overnight stays in a hospital, Kagan said.

Area physicians say a small office building can house medical equipment that is on the same state-of-the-art level as what is found in large teaching hospitals. And community-level cancer care is not limited to chemotherapy. South Suburban Oncology Center, also based in Quincy, has seen its radiation treatment patient base skyrocket in recent years.

"We opened in 1995 with one doctor," said Dr. Tania Lingos, the center's medical director. The full-service radiation oncology center now has four physicians plus support medical staff.

"We see about 100 patients a day," Lingos said. "Last year we did over 25,000 treatments. Every single one of those patients would otherwise have to travel to Boston."

Lingos said that doctors at the center work hard to stay on top of technological advancements, and periodically update equipment to offer the latest in three-dimensional imaging and pinpoint-accurate radiation machines. That, along with the social service support, counseling, and comfortable setting of a local office, has contributed to the center's popularity with patients, he said.

The South Suburban staff is affiliated with Quincy Medical Center, South Shore Hospital, Massachusetts General Hospital and other area hospitals and medical centers, so its physicians have the ability to work closely with patients' primary care physicians.

Kagan said it is a priority to provide care that is competitive with large hospitals. One example, he said, is Commonwealth Hematology-Oncology's use of IntelliDose, a computer program that keeps track of chemotherapy drug dosages and potentially adverse drug interactions. Commonwealth also keeps the most recent cancer treatment guidelines available electronically, he said.

"Cancer is a very frightening disease for most people," Kagan said. "This can make it less frightening."