

Patient Advocate Corner

CancerCare: Help and Hope in a Time of Crisis



Diane Blum, MSW

By *Diane Blum, MSW*

Since its founding nearly 63 years ago, CancerCare has helped cancer patients and their loved ones manage the emotional and financial obstacles presented by a cancer diagnosis. Our patients come from all walks of life, all ages, and all stages of diagnosis. CancerCare does not just assist the person with cancer; we also assist their family members, caregivers, and the health care

professionals who serve them.

CancerCare is an important partner to oncology professionals as their patients navigate the uncertainties, anxieties, and fears that a cancer diagnosis presents—emotional and practical concerns that many oncologists and their staffs may not be fully prepared to address. Our services are offered completely free of charge to anyone who needs them, anywhere in the United States. Our services include:

- **Psychosocial counseling.** CancerCare provides psychosocial counseling by our full-time staff of professional oncology social workers, who focus on the predictable emotional stresses of a cancer diagnosis and treatment. Counseling sessions are offered face-to-face, by telephone, and online to individuals, families, and groups. Last year, we provided counseling to more than 30,000 people. CancerCare also assists children and teens through our CancerCare for Kids program. While many other organizations focus on the needs of children who have cancer, our program is one of the few available that addresses the psychological and social issues faced by a child whose parent or sibling has cancer.
- **Telephone Education Workshops.** These workshops allow participants to call in and listen to leading oncology experts discuss the latest developments in cancer research and treatment. Last year, nearly 35,000 people participated in these programs, and thousands more listened to them via our online archives at our Web site, www.cancercare.org.
- **Educational literature.** We offer our award-winning *Connect* booklet series and *Inform* fact sheets, which cover a wide variety of topics about the latest developments and trends in cancer research and treatment, as well as practical tips for coping with a cancer diagnosis, treatment adverse effects, and family concerns. Our

publications can be downloaded directly from cancercare.org. Last year, we had 1.6 million online visitors who accessed our extensive literature, took part in an online support group, or listened to a past workshop from our archives.

- **Financial assistance.** Because cancer creates financial hardships for many patients and their families, CancerCare provides limited monetary grants to help cover the costs of transportation, child care, and other living expenses while a person is undergoing treatment. Last year, we distributed \$4.7 million in financial assistance to more than 16,000 families in need.

Much has changed since CancerCare opened its doors in 1944. Yet, our services have never been more necessary or more needed, not only by people with cancer, but also by the oncology specialists who make up their health care team.

In recent years, guidelines and recommendations by prestigious groups have stated that psychosocial services—the ability to address the needs of the whole person—are a significant indicator of quality care. Yet, the kind of psychosocial support we naturally want for ourselves and our patients often isn't realistic within the confines of one physician's office. Today's oncology care is characterized by time constraints, an ever increasing caseload of patients, a lack of structure for addressing the complex emotions a cancer diagnosis often provokes, and the changing course of cancer therapies with outpatient care and the growing use of oral treatments. These are all significant reasons why the demand for the kinds of services CancerCare provides continues to grow.

CancerCare does not prescribe or endorse any specific course of treatment, medication, or regimen. What we do offer is accurate, timely information; emotional support; and professional, practical assistance to overcome the obstacles that may stand in the way of the best possible outcome, both for the patient and the health care professional.

Diane Blum, MSW, joined CancerCare in 1990 after serving as a social work supervisor at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, New York, and the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, Massachusetts. She is Editor-in-Chief of the ASCO patient Web site, plwc.org. Her extensive research and articles about the psychosocial needs of cancer patients and their families have appeared in numerous professional and medical journals.

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