Printed May 24, 2013 from http://www.cancer.net/advocacy-and-policy/patient-advocacy-and-asco/advocate-and-survivor-voices/2011-gastrointestinal-cancers-symposium-patient-advocates-perspective-yoshiyuki-majima

2011 Gastrointestinal Cancers Symposium: A Patient Advocate's Perspective, with Yoshiyuki Majima

Editor's Note: This is part of a series of Patient Advocate Guest Columns, launched as a forum for patient advocates to address a topic, issue, or trend within the cancer community through Cancer.Net, the patient information website of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO).

By Yoshiyuki Majima, General Manager, Pancreatic Cancer Action Network Japan

I attended the 2011 Gastrointestinal Cancers Symposium in San Francisco, California, as a patient advocate representing Pancreatic Cancer Action Network (PanCAN) Japan. PanCAN Japan, established in 2006, is the international affiliate of PanCAN, which is headquartered in Manhattan Beach, California.

At PanCAN, we work to create hope in a comprehensive way through research, patient support, community outreach, and advocacy. Since cancer research is critical in the development of new drugs and therapies, we recommend that people with pancreatic cancer consider clinical trials when exploring treatment options.

Cancer patient support groups are not as common in Japan as they are in the United States. We have just over 200 small local support groups in Japan. Unlike the United States, non-profit organizations in Japan (referred to as NPOs) are rarely granted tax exempt status -- making donations rare and forcing organizations to rely primarily on membership fees and volunteers to conduct their work. PanCAN Japan operates in a similar fashion, relying on volunteers rather than paid employees. As a result, it is quite difficult to afford to travel to ASCO meetings, in addition to all of the other expenses - housing, registration, transportation, and meals. The latest scientific and clinical discoveries from the United States are oftentimes difficult to access and then translate to Japanese. At PanCAN Japan, we fill this gap by attending ASCO meetings each year and publishing reports specifically for people in Japan.

The ASCO Annual Meeting is a great opportunity to meet specialists from Japan. At one ASCO Annual Meeting, I met a gastrointestinal (GI) cancer specialist. Since then, he has spoken at our symposia many times and in 2010 became a member of our medical advisory council. At the 2010 ASCO Annual Meeting and the 2011 GI Symposium, I met several more GI cancer specialists - all thanks to ASCO and the patient advocate scholarship I received. As a result of these connections, we have been able to establish a network of Japanese specialists for raising awareness and conducting educational activities in conjunction with PanCAN's 2011 Purple Ribbon Caravan.

Thanks to the generosity of The Conquer Cancer Foundation, Foundation employees, and ASCO employees, the scholarship I received to attend the 2011 GI Symposium has furthered my education and afforded me many valuable experiences. Recently, I was appointed to the planning committee of the Japan Society of Clinical Oncology (JSCO) to plan and organize a scholarship program, educational program, and a patient advocate lounge. I am excited to be given this opportunity to put into practice what I have learned from ASCO and I will do my best to help cancer patients in Japan.

If you are a patient advocate interested in authoring a future Patient Advocate Guest Column and Podcast, please contact patientadvocates@asco.org[1] or 571-483-1358.

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Last Updated: March 04, 2011

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