
Palo Alto nurse navigators assist prostate cancer patients through their course of treatment

Palo Alto Medical Foundation, Mountain View, California

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All prostate cancer treatment options can significantly affect men for the rest of their lives, which makes it difficult for patients to choose which option is best. At the Palo Alto Medical Foundation, nurse navigators with special training in prostate cancer guide and coordinate care for their patients.

Navigating the Way Through a Prostate Cancer Journey

PAMF Receives NIH Grant to Study Role of Nurse Navigator in Cancer Care

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Prostate cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death among men. The American Cancer Society estimates that 27,360 men in the United States will die of prostate cancer in 2009. Although there are many treatment options available—from radiation therapy to surgical removal of the prostate—all options have side effects that can significantly affect men for the rest of their lives. This makes it difficult to choose which option is best. Fortunately, PAMF has received a grant from the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) to study ways to reduce the confusion and anxiety that arise before and after this decision-making process.

“We believe that if men with prostate cancer are armed with the knowledge they need to make a fully educated decision about their course of treatment and feel the benefits of their treatment outweigh any potential side effects, then they are happier and their quality of life is improved,” Nancy Brown, Ph.D., the principal investigator of the study, says. “The NIH grant will allow us to prove this and further develop care processes and resources to ensure our patients have all of the information they need to make a decision with confidence.”

The study will examine how a nurse navigator can help prostate cancer patients make treatment decisions. A nurse navigator is a registered nurse with special training in prostate cancer who coordinates care at PAMF, answers questions and guides patients through the cancer care journey. He or she helps manage the logistics of a treatment plan and explains options to patients to help them feel more empowered and confident and less anxious in their decisions.

Beyond scheduling appointments and coordinating treatment, the nurse navigator can help patients take advantage of the myriad of cancer support services that PAMF offers. These services include assistance from nurse educators, social workers, dietitians, physical therapists and counselors. The nurse navigator also provides prostate cancer patients with a notebook of information ranging from treatment options to diet suggestions to keep them informed during their journey.

“Something drives each man’s decision about what type of treatment to have,” Dr. Brown says. “We need to understand what is most important to him and provide him with the information he needs to make a decision that will support his lifestyle and goals.”

Nurse navigators have been essential to PAMF’s prostate cancer program for several years now. The NIH grant will allow PAMF to formally document exactly how powerful having a central person coordinating care can be— especially when a patient is facing the emotionally and physically strenuous challenge of cancer.

After the two-year study is complete, Dr. Brown and her colleagues on the cancer care team will evaluate the data. If it supports the value of the nurse navigator and prostate cancer resource notebook—as Dr. Brown believes it will—then the program will be used as a model throughout PAMF’s Cancer Care Program.

We can’t promise our patients a certain outcome,” Tina Pierce, administrative director of PAMF’s Cancer Care Program, says. “But we can promise patients that we’ll provide them with all of the compassion and individual care they need to feel supported and the information and resources they need to feel confident that the path they’ve chosen for their cancer care journey is the right one for them.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Jill Antonides

Director, Communications and Public Affairs
Palo Alto Medical Foundation
795 El Camino Real
Palo Alto, CA 94301
tel. 650.691.6240
antonij1@pamf.org
www.pamf.org