UT Southwestern
Simmons Cancer Center

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# Hope and knowledge: Highlights from the UTSW Pancreatic Cancer Patient Summit

UT Southwestern's Pancreatic Cancer Program, in collaboration with the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network (PanCAN), recently hosted its annual Pancreatic Cancer Patient Summit. This highly anticipated event brought together nearly 100 patients, caregivers, and family members, along with the UTSW clinical team and its PanCAN partners, for an impactful day dedicated to shared experience, education, and community building.

The Summit serves as a platform to move beyond the clinic to address the medical, emotional, and logistical realities of the pancreatic cancer journey. The overarching theme of the day was clear: Everyone is a vital member of the care team, and knowledge is empowerment.

## Clinical excellence

UTSW's pancreatic cancer clinical team provided essential updates, translating research and comprehensive supportive care into accessible, actionable information. Sessions covered the latest advancements in treatment approach and clinical trials, highlighting how understanding risk factors through genetic testing is crucial for personalized treatment and prevention.

The team also focused on holistic, interdisciplinary care: Cancer dietitian Shelli Hardy, M.C.N., RD, explained why nutrition is key to managing weight loss, adapting to postsurgical changes, and optimizing treatment tolerance, while Michael Fediw, M.D., Medical Director of UTSW's Cancer Rehabilitation Program, detailed the importance of safe, tailored movement to reduce fatigue and improve overall physical and mental resilience. These segments emphasized the program's commitment to treating the *whole* patient, not just the disease.

Positive feedback from attendees highlighted the success of the event in achieving its mission of informed and compassionate care, with one patient sharing:

> "Excellent Pancreatic Cancer Patient Summit. This summit gets better and more effective every year. Outstanding job by everyone involved. UTSW is a model institution!"

**Voices from PanCare Partners**

The most impactful sessions of the day featured personal testimonials from patients and caregivers belonging to UTSW's PanCare Partners advocacy program. Their stories provided raw, honest perspectives on navigating the complexity of a pancreatic cancer diagnosis, including practical advice, communication strategies, and invaluable lessons on maintaining quality of life. These empowering personal accounts emphasized the importance of self-advocacy and the crucial role of the caregiving team.

**Shane Kirkpatrick**, a patient advocate, shared his strategy for staying focused on what he can control and highlighted the necessity of a supportive community during the cancer journey.

Similarly, advocate **Karen Self** encouraged patients to actively participate as shared decision-makers with their clinical team. She underscored the importance of "knowing your why" and maintaining a positive outlook, stating powerfully, "I'm going to watch [my grandchildren] grow up and dance at their weddings – and it is [my care team's] job to help me do that!"

Further driving home the message of sustained living, **Rebecca Gaffney**, speaking as a daughter and caregiver, offered deeply impactful, practical lessons from her father's journey: Don't be afraid to ask for help, find humor and laughter whenever possible, and, critically, don't stop living – make time for hobbies, dates, birthdays, and anything you feel up to doing.

**Philip McLarty** concluded the day, leaving the audience full of hope and connection by sharing his perspective as a patient on gratitude and living fully in the present moment.

These personal accounts reflected the value of the community space offered by the Pancreatic Cancer Patient Summit. As one attendee noted:

> "I feel like UTSW is phenomenal. I have been given a warm welcome by everyone I've met. I'm so glad to be getting my care at UTSW. I plan to come to next year's Summit too!"

UT Southwestern's Pancreatic Cancer Program looks forward to continuing this vital annual event, reinforcing the bond between the clinical team and the courageous community they serve. To hear more from this year's Summit, listen to the recording here.