**2016 Georgia Medical Society’s Healthcare Heroes; Health Care Innovation**

**Integration of Palliative Care into a Community Cancer Center**

Under the leadership of The Steward Center for Palliative Care’s director, **Laura Farless, MD** and **Jennifer Fournier, APRN-CNS,** of the Nancy N. and J. C. Lewis Cancer & Research Pavilion, outpatient palliative care has been successfully integrated into a cancer center in our community. Together, they integrated a multi-disciplinary team consisting of a physician, advance practice nurses, nurse navigators, social workers, dieticians and chaplain who have all specifically trained in palliative care. These specialists provide expert management of distressing symptoms such as pain, nausea, shortness of breath, anxiety and depression, while attending to the emotional, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual needs of the patient and the family.

Palliative care is active intervention to achieve the maximum comfort and function of patients. Palliation (relief of symptoms) should always be an important part of patient care along the patient care trajectory - regardless of whether the patient has just received a diagnosis, is in active treatment, or has completed their treatment regimen. Though commonly misperceived as a specialty targeting end-of-life care, palliative medicine specialists provide the best possible quality of life for patients and their families, despite the stage of the disease or current treatment. However, in the advanced cancer patient, it may be the only care when curative care is no longer the goal.

Mr. W is one patient who exemplifies the power of palliative care in action. Metastatic, stage IV prostate cancer had Mr. W. in a wheelchair with physical and emotional pain and with a reasonable life expectancy of six months. The nurse navigator requested a referral to the outpatient palliative care clinic. All members of the team have worked with Mr. W. and his wife to effectively assist him in managing his symptoms over the last two and one-half years. He uses a walker now, has symptoms effectively managed with monthly follow-up visits to the outpatient palliative care clinic, and finds joy in being able to work in his woodworking ministry.

Cancer patients in our community are fortunate to have this specialty of Outpatient Palliative Care to supplement the prescribed therapies offered at St. Joseph’s/Candler. Inpatients also benefit from palliative care services with the chaplain, Sister Pat Kennedy, RSM, serving as the vital liaison between inpatient and outpatient palliative care. Dr. Farless and Ms. Fournier’s team provides continuous, effective communication with both the patient and his or her family to ensure that goals are mutually set and understood by the multidisciplinary team, the patient and his or her family. The team discusses issues such as artificial feeding and hydration, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and any other measure that may impact patient’s quality of life. The patient’s understanding of the disease process is thoroughly assessed with a discussion of patient preferences for disease management.

Communication with other physicians involved in the patient’s care is also crucial in promoting the highest level of quality of life for the patient. On two separate occasions Mr. W. had increasing bony pain. The patient’s radiation oncologist was consulted resulting in additional treatment for pain management. On another occasion, the patient was assessed at an emergent outpatient palliative care visit as being dehydrated. Prompt collaboration with his medical oncologist resulted in effective management of this distressing symptom.

Satisfaction surveys have been completed by outpatient palliative care patients since the inception of the clinic in June 2012. All respondents over this time would recommend this palliative care clinic to their friends and family with 84% rating the clinic as “9” or “10” on a 0-10 scale. Comments such as “The clinic has helped me to live a normal life again.” and “This is the best there is.” were written by the patients on these surveys.

Dr. Farless and Ms. Fournier consider it a privilege and an honor to be partners in patient care in the community to improve patient and family quality of life.