

When a person is given the diagnosis of a serious and potentially life-threatening disease, they are also facing a number of questions: "Do I need a second opinion?" "How will I tell my loved ones?" "Will I be able to continue working?" "How soon do I need to receive treatment?" "Where can I find the best and the widest range of choices to treat my illness?" For many cancer patients, the answer to the last question may lie with Dr. Joan Keit of Midwest Radiation Oncology and her counterparts at Immanuel's Cancer Center.

I recently had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Keit. As someone who has not yet had to deal with the frightening realities that cancer can bring, I asked her to explain the basics to me in very simple terms and she was happy to oblige. Dr. Keit is a radiation oncologist, meaning that she uses radiation to treat cancer. Along the same lines, a medical oncologist uses chemotherapy, and a surgical oncologist uses surgery to treat cancer.

At the Immanuel Medical Center, the cancer team is within one integrated center, enabling specialized physicians and nurses to create a multidisciplinary, total care plan for each individual patient, Dr. Keit explains. A dedicated nurse psychologist, who is certified in grief and end-of-life counseling, along with a dietitian (to help patients maintain a sustaining and healing diet), are just two of the other professionals who are dedicated to patient care in the Cancer Center.

Dr. Keit tells me that most of the patients she sees are referred to her by other physicians, but about 25% seek her out because of the unique treatment options available at Midwest Radiation Oncology and the Cancer Center. Dr. Keit sees people from all over the world. She says that the well-educated patient often sees a better outcome as a result of seeking out information about their disease and the possibilities for treatment. While the Internet is a wonderful resource for information, she cautions that individuals should be aware that there are a lot of inaccuracies out there as well. Thorough research involves asking questions and using respected and responsible sources for information.

Today, Dr. Keit says that about 50% of her patients have a curable form of cancer. The remaining patients can still be helped—if not cured—using effective treatments. For example, an individual with bone cancer may not be able to be cured of their disease, and so relieving some of their pain and improving their quality of life become the goals.

The techniques and treatment options that Dr. Keit uses entail fewer side effects and better targeting of the cancer cells than procedures of the past, she explains. Tomotherapy is one of the innovative therapies that Dr. Keit offers, and she tells me they are the first in Nebraska to provide it as a treatment choice. Tomotherapy is a type of x-ray treatment like standard radiation. Unlike standard radiation where treatment is applied through fields, Tomotherapy can be applied more specifically.

The source of radiation is very small, Dr. Keit tells me, adding, "The radiation is delivered in thousands of tiny little packets or pixels. We can give higher doses of radiation because we can essentially sculpt the dose around normal tissue areas." The time that the patient spends in treatment is essentially the same, Dr.

Keit says, but it is much more effective than standard radiation.

Tomotherapy also has fewer long-term side effects. For example, patients who are being treated for cancer in their left breast risk damage to the heart with traditional radiation treatment. With the heart in such close proximity to the left breast, traditional radiation therapy ends up "clipping" part of the heart muscle while treating the cancer in that area. Thus, the chance of future heart failure in these patients is increased. With Tomotherapy, the radiation treatment can be sculpted around the breast, avoiding the heart and other sensitive tissues. Along with breast cancer, Dr. Keit tells me this therapy is also very useful for treating prostate cancer, lung cancer, gastrointestinal tumors, and anal cancer. Since January 2008, she has done more than 6100 Tomotherapy procedures.

Along with Tomotherapy, Dr. Keit offers several other treatment options for her patients. High Dose Rate Brachytherapy (HDR) is

a treatment that delivers radiation internally by implanting a tube inside the cancer, and then delivering radiation through a tiny seed. Dr. Keit says that over the past five years, she has performed this procedure more than 700 times, making hers the most active HDR program in the state.

Stereotactic Radiosurgery is another treatment option used by Dr. Keit. This therapy uses a highly focused, high dose of radiation to treat small tumors in the brain. It has been shown to improve survival for select patients, she tells me. Stereotactic Body Radiotherapy (SBRT) is similar to Stereotactic Radiosurgery. It employs a highly focused dose of radiation to small tumors in very sensitive areas of the body, such as the lungs, spinal tumors, and so forth.

The balance of support services along with effective technological options is what sets the Cancer Center apart, Dr. Keit tells me. "We have more treatment options than anywhere else in the state."

Along with the scientific side of care, it is also important that patients feel as comfortable as possible. With total patient care as the goal, the Cancer Center uses a nurse navigator program. The Alegant Health Web site (www.alegent.com) explains, "The nurse navigator is an oncology certified nurse who is the single point-of-contact for patients and families. The nurse navigator can assist with scheduling initial tests and consultations. They also collaborate with members of the medical team to ensure information is current and understood by all of the physicians, nurses, and other team members. They help the patient and family members understand his or her diagnosis and plan of care. The nurse navigator serves as an educational resource for the patient and their family. The nurse navigator helps guide the patient and family through the health care system."

Dr. Keit's view fits in well with the overall vision of the Cancer Center team at Immanuel Medical Center. "People are fighting for their lives," she says, "and we want to help them." By tapping into her scientific knowledge and experience, and combining that with emotional support and understanding every patient's needs, Dr. Keit says she strives to give each individual the best care possible. For more information about Midwest Radiation Oncology, visit them online at www.midwestradiationoncology.com or call 572-2265.

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DR. JOAN KEIT OF MIDWEST RADIATION ONCOLOGY

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