

Oncologistics

Community practice health
for a post-pandemic future

12 Healthcare payer
trends in 2021

16 Drug pricing reform
and practice advocacy

20 An interview with authors
John and Liza Marshall





Eye on ION

Cancer Partners of Nebraska makes occupational therapy a cornerstone of patient care

Oncologistics recently caught up with ION member Cancer Partners of Nebraska, providers of all-inclusive cancer and hematology care in the greater Lincoln, Nebraska area, to learn about their new approach to patient rehabilitation. Today, occupational therapy (OT) and physical therapy (PT) have become key components of the practice's commitment to a personalized approach to treatment and the total support they aim to provide every patient in their care.

From inspiration to innovation

In creating an occupational therapy department, Cancer Partners of Nebraska hoped to develop a rehabilitation program specifically devoted to the individual needs of cancer patients, and to be able to incorporate OT and PT therapists into their patients' existing care teams. This unique combination of cancer care and rehabilitation therapy is designed to fill the needs at each stage of the patients' treatment and survivorship.

Because OT and PT can be both prehabilitative and rehabilitative components of an individualized treatment plan, patients can follow a personalized therapy program that begins at the start of care, before side effects like weakness or fatigue set in. Their therapy program can be designed to guide them through rehabilitation before, during, and after treatment as needed.

"We strive to provide comprehensive cancer care, and rehabilitation is a key part in that," says Executive Director Justin Rousek, PhD, MPH, MS. "Cancer treatment can take a toll on patients, and our rehab services can help them regain physical strength and activity tolerance, reduce discomfort, anxiety, and depression, identify possible side effects of their treatment, and ultimately allows the patient to be proactive and involved in their care."

With the addition of their rehabilitation therapy department, the clinic's umbrella of services expanded to include restorative yoga, Healthy-Steps classes (originally developed for breast cancer survivors to help with balance, neuropathy, motor control, and lymphatic drainage), certified mastectomy fittings, lymphedema management, and pelvic floor therapy (which focuses on the pelvic muscles, ligaments, and connective tissues that

contribute to sexual function, bladder, and bowel control). Symptoms addressed in treatment include lymphedema, fatigue, musculoskeletal pain, joint stiffness, weakness, cognitive problems, balance problems, and issues with communication, swallowing, or eating.

Breaking barriers through coordinated care

"Patient referrals from our oncologists started out slow," says Rousek. "Rehabilitation wasn't top-of-mind for many of our providers when they were consulting with their patients." To overcome this potential roadblock, Cancer Partners of Nebraska connected their OT and PT therapists with their entire clinical team, including advanced practice providers (APPs), physician nurses, clinic nurses, infusion nurses, a registered dietitian, and front-desk employees. Open communication across the clinical team

has broken down silos and enhanced visibility across the continuum of care. "This has allowed us to coordinate patient care at a much higher quality level than before," says Rousek. "All of our staff play an important role with our patient population and can identify mobility issues that a physician may not see during the consult."

Today the program continues to expand, as is evident in its growing team. While the rehabilitation therapy clinic opened with one OT therapist and one technician, today the clinic has three occupational therapists and one physical therapist on staff, as well as five therapy assistants and techs, a dedicated mastectomy fitter, and a receptionist.

Demonstrating value through data

Some patients may be hesitant to begin OT or PT at first or may wonder if rehabilitation is really necessary. To show progress, the team takes baseline strength and discomfort measurements

at the first rehabilitation session. "Once they start to see actual results, their attitude quickly changes," says Rousek.

Over time, the data speaks for itself. In fact, the rehabilitation program has been so successful, says Rousek, that several surgeons outside of the organization have referred their patients to Cancer Partners of Nebraska's therapists to prepare them for surgery and help with their post-operative recovery.

Considering an OT program for your practice?

"Bring in all key decision makers, including physicians, as early in the process as possible," says Rousek. "This will help determine how the therapy program will fit within their existing service lines and will also allow you to truly address your patients' unique needs."

He adds that there are several advanced certifications and training opportunities that therapists can pursue (e.g., lymphedema therapy,



breast cancer care) that will help them specialize in the specific needs of their patient population. Says Rousek, "Personalizing our rehabilitation program has been key to our success."

To learn more about rehabilitation services at Cancer Partners of Nebraska, visit: cancerpartners.com/care/rehab.

