

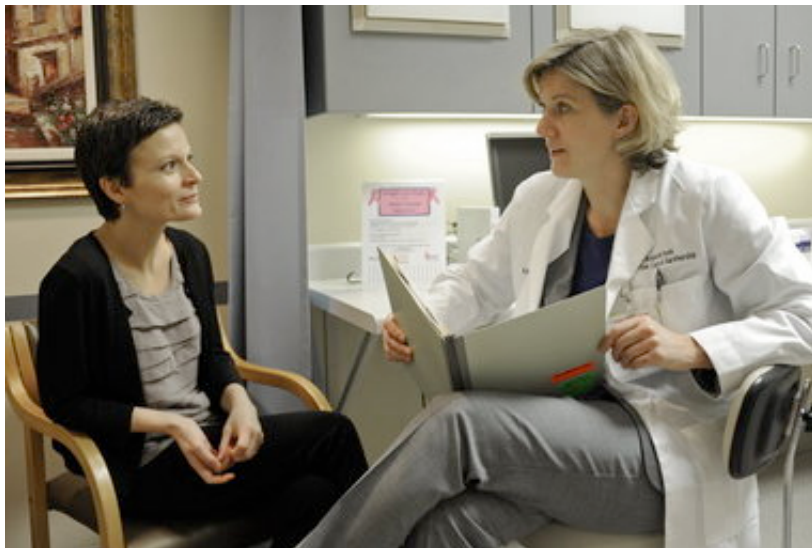


UAB clinic helps cancer survivors beyond treatment

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By **Hannah Wolfson -- The Birmingham News**



As more cancer patients are living longer, there's a growing need for special medical care that will follow them through their whole lives. Noles, left, meets with her doctor, Elizabeth Kvale, the clinic's director. Noles credits the team at the clinic with getting her through her aggressive cancer treatment and expects them to help her live a long life. (The Birmingham News/Bernard Troncale)

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama — When Kristen Noles was diagnosed with breast cancer the day before her 35th birthday, she soon felt overwhelmed. She started aggressive treatment but was worried about her husband and three children and nervous about navigating the team of doctors managing her care.

"I've always had just one doctor and great health," said Noles. "It can be very confusing — who do you call when you have five doctors?" Now she has an easy answer: she just calls the **Supportive Care and Survivorship Clinic** at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. As a patient at the clinic, Noles can turn to the doctors, nurses and specialists there to guide her and to work with her cancer and other doctors.

Since Noles started there last March, her doctor has helped control the bone pain that's been a side effect of her treatment, worked with her on comforting her children and sent her to a nutritionist to help her maintain her weight.

"She's not just taking care of my disease, she's tapping into resources that I need to still be a mom, a wife and a nurse," said Noles, who — even though she works at UAB — hadn't heard of the clinic until a friend recommended it. "She's treating me holistically."

The clinic, which is having a grand opening tonight for its new location in the Kirklin Clinic, is part of a growing national trend toward addressing the specific needs of patients with serious illnesses.

"We're coordinating and integrating care for the patients across the whole spectrum," said Elizabeth Kvale, who is

Noles' doctor and medical director of the Supportive Care and Survivorship program at UAB.

To do that, the clinic musters a team of in-house psychologists, physical therapists, nutritionists — even a massage therapist — to tackle each patient's individual requirements. About 70 percent of the patients so far have cancer, but it also treats other dangerous illnesses such as lung and heart disease.

The clinic fits under the category of palliative care, which many people associate with the terminal stages of disease, but actually just means there's a focus on patients' comfort. While the team is prepared to help with end-of-life issues if needed, the first goal is to offer support as people fight illnesses, and then long-term care for their new lives afterward.

For example, a cancer patient might get help with pain, nausea and other side effects during chemotherapy, plus psychological help to cope with the illness and stave off the depression that often comes with a diagnosis.

"A lot of folks we're just trying to keep in the game so they can get their treatment," Kvale said. "I always feel like I'm saying, 'Get back in there, Rocky!'"

With remission or a cure, the team works on rehabilitation and managing the emotional issues that often arise when those with cancer move from being patients to survivors. That can mean anything from helping those with head and neck cancer regain movement in their shoulders to addressing the trauma and fear that can accompany a cure.

Experts say such care is increasingly important as earlier diagnoses and improved treatments are helping more patients survive longer. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Cancer Institute, 64 percent of adults diagnosed with cancer can expect to be alive in five years. The number of cancer survivors in the United States has increased from 3 million in 1971 to almost 12 million in 2007, 4 percent of the population. All of those people will need special care throughout their lives.

"If you're a breast cancer survivor these days, you're actually more likely to die of heart disease than you are of breast cancer," said Kvale. "We're trying to put an emphasis on helping people reclaim their quality of life."

That can mean coordinating with the cancer care team and primary care physicians to make sure everything from radiation treatment to cholesterol and bone density tests are on track. Younger cancer patients like Noles may need help finding a primary care provider, Kvale said, and it's hard for everyone to get appointments with physical therapists and psychologists who have special expertise with cancer and other diseases.

Each morning, Kvale's team meets and runs down the list of the day's appointments to tailor treatments to each patient. Anyone can become a patient, even if he or she is not already being treated at UAB. For most patients, insurance covers the basics like doctors and nurses, but extras are billed on a sliding scale according to need. The clinic relies on private donations to help defray the costs and on the Comprehensive Cancer Clinic, which funded the renovation.

Kvale admits the customized care the clinic provides is more expensive, but says it could save money in the long term by keeping survivors healthy. She says it's also trying to create a new model for holistic care.

But mostly, she says, the clinic is trying to help people manage their disease without being overtaken by it. Noles, who is close to completing her final round of radiation but knows she'll need special care the rest of her life, said it's working.

"It's truly individualized. It's phenomenal," she said. "I know that I would not be able to be a full-time employee, a mom, a wife and a daughter and live through this aggressive treatment that I've experienced over this past year without this clinic as a support network. It's gotten me through."

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