

# LIVING WELL

## Martha Jefferson Cancer Conference Gives Patients a Team of Specialists

When a person faces a cancer diagnosis, they are undeniably overwhelmed. The next steps seem daunting at first, but they become more manageable as the patient and their families are guided through the treatment plan by their oncologist.

What many people do not know, however, is that oncologist is just one member of a multi-disciplinary team of doctors and health care providers that work together to provide the best cancer care for their patients. With the knowledge and expertise of a whole team of specialists behind them, the individual oncologist helps his patients navigate through the maze of choices to develop an integrated plan that fits each patient's specific needs and lifestyle.

At Martha Jefferson Cancer Center, this team meets every Friday at their "Cancer Conference," and has done so since Dr. Cynthia Spaulding, radiation oncologist at Martha Jefferson, led the charge to establish the group in 1992.

This working conference allows medical oncologists, radiation oncologists, surgeons, urologists, pathologists, radiologists and other clinicians to discuss their patients and consider the expert advice each brings to the table. Additionally, participation by chaplains, oncology navigators, a genetic counselor and other support team members ensures the whole patient is considered.

### A Friendly Meeting of the Minds

The physicians at Martha Jefferson Cancer Center maintain close, collegial relationships with one another



with their primary focus always being on their individual patients. Furthermore, the weekly Cancer Conference allows them to come together in the interest of those patients and provide a wide range of expertise.

"It's an essential part of every cancer center, because you need to have the physicians in all the areas of cancer care weigh in," said Dr. Spaulding. "We always talk about our cases in depth, and our treatment recommendations may change because of the various expert opinions at the table."

"Patients are presented concurrently with their clinical treatment," noted Dr. Jon Ciambotti, radiologist with CRL Surgical and Radiology Associates. "It's real time for patients, as doctors often tell the patients that they will present the case to the Conference and call them back the in afternoon after the meeting with a suggested course of treatment."

### Taking the Whole Patient into Perspective

During the meeting, the physicians look at more than just the cancer itself, considering the lives of patients and their families to ensure that they

not only provide the best medical course of treatment, but also care for a patient's mind and spirit as well.

In fact, noted Dr. Lynn Dengel, a breast surgeon with Virginia Breast Care, the patients' wishes and goals are an important part of the conversation at Martha Jefferson.

"The philosophy of Martha Jefferson—the Caring Tradition—really comes through in these discussions," said Dr. Dengel. "The physicians know their patients exceptionally well. Beyond their medical diagnosis, they know their broader goals and priorities. Sometimes the patient's goals are in conflict with standard care. In those cases especially, the Conference allows us to figure out how we could restructure the care to meet a patient's needs and as well as provide excellent, appropriate cancer care."

### The Definition of a Team

In the 20-plus years that Martha Jefferson has been home to its Cancer Conference, according to Dr. Spaulding, the Conference has become the heart of the cancer program.

"It's something that we all really look forward to at the end of every week," said Dr. Spaulding. "We're working, we enjoy being with each other, and there is no question that can't be asked."

"Having worked at other hospitals, one of my favorite things about Mar-

tha Jefferson is the cordialness of all my physician colleagues," noted Dr. Ciambotti. "Many of my colleagues are in private practice and could have their own interests and feel competitive. But it's not like that. Every physician here has best interests of the patient at heart."

Dr. Dengel agreed that the collegial environment allows for a truly collaborative effort.

"Everyone who comes feels comfortable discussing their opinions and having an intellectual discussion. Even if there are dissenting opinions, it's done in a very respectful, productive way," said Dr. Dengel.

"It's a safe and welcoming environment," added Dr. Ciambotti. "It's really nice to know that no matter what, we did the best thing for the patient. It's what makes Martha Jefferson so special. Very few places are like that in this world."

For more information about the Martha Jefferson Cancer Care Center, visit [www.mjhcancer.org](http://www.mjhcancer.org); or call Health Connection at (434) 654-7009.

Sponsored by

Martha Jefferson Hospital

SENTARA