How a $300K Grant Will Improve Cancer Care for Rural Patients

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Huntsman Cancer Institute at the University of Utah has been awarded $300,000 from the American Cancer Society to expand patient navigation and connect rural cancer patients that reside in the Mountain West to lifesaving services and resources.

Patient navigators are vital members of the health care team. They coordinate appointments, connect to internal and community resources, and facilitate communication between the patient and health care team, among many other duties. These services are free to Huntsman Cancer Institute patients. Huntsman Cancer Institute is the only National Cancer Institute-designated Comprehensive Cancer Center in the Mountain West, serving the largest geographic region of any cancer center, including Utah, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, and Wyoming.

The American Cancer Society's commitment to ensure those impacted by cancer are being cared for, regardless of where they live, will help Huntsman Cancer Institute do the same. Arif Kamal, MD, chief patient officer at the American Cancer Society, says, "ACS is committed to advancing high-quality cancer care through capacity building and support for innovative, sustainable models of oncology patient navigation. Patient navigation is a crucial component in our commitment to ensuring everyone has a fair and just opportunity to prevent, find, treat, and survive cancer."

The patient navigators at Huntsman Cancer Institute currently focus on three unique communities: Adolescent and Young Adults, American Indians, and Spanish Speakers. This award will expand the patient navigation program to focus on a fourth area: rural residents in Utah, Montana, and Wyoming. As part of the expanded program, an additional patient navigator will be hired and trained to meet rural patients' unique needs and help address barriers to individualized, timely, and equitable care. The navigator will collaborate closely with members of Huntsman Cancer Institute's affiliate hospital program: St. Peter's Health in Helena, Montana; St. John's Health in Jackson, Wyoming; and Memorial Hospital Sweetwater Regional Cancer Center in Rock Springs, Wyoming.

"Huntsman Cancer Institute's patient navigation team is excited for this opportunity to expand patient navigation services to rural cancer patients and their families. Rural cancer patients face many barriers to equitable health care: higher cancer death rates, higher frequency of late-stage cancer diagnosis, lower access to clinical trials, and lower likelihoods of receiving standard of care in treatment, among them," says Donna Branson, director of patient and public education at

Huntsman Cancer Institute. “This funding will help us identify the top challenges for rural cancer patients and implement strategies to better serve them.”

Sachin Apte, MD, MS, MBA, chief clinical officer of Huntsman Cancer Institute and physician-in-chief of the cancer hospital, reiterates the impact. “This grant from the American Cancer Society is designed to bolster navigation capacity-building through expansion into the area we serve—a vast rural and frontier population in the Mountain West,” says Apte. “These residents experience significant challenges when receiving complex cancer care. With this grant, we can further develop a rural navigation service targeted to the unique needs of rural patients. Such efforts bring us one step closer to realizing our vision of delivering a cancer-free frontier.”

Huntsman Cancer Institute is one of 14 health systems across the country to receive this grant.

Sponsorship for this initiative was led by the Janssen Pharmaceutical Companies of Johnson & Johnson, along with Bristol Myers Squibb. Additional sponsors include Daiichi Sankyo, the National Institutes of Health/National Cancer Institute including P30 CA042014, and Huntsman Cancer Foundation.

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