Access for All

Barriers to cancer treatment access come in many forms.

June 18, 2018 By Liz Highleyman

Today's remarkable treatment breakthroughs can feel like a hollow achievement if they're not available to many people living with cancer. Few things are as frustrating as knowing that a promising new therapy is out there and you can't take advantage of it.

Barriers to access come in many forms. Sometimes scientific advances don't seem to move fast enough for people with life-threatening illnesses. In the 1980s and '90s, AIDS activists helped speed up drug development and broaden access to experimental therapies. Today, Right to Try legislation aims to increase access by bypassing the Food and Drug Administration. But as Karuna Jaggar argues, these laws may offer little more than false hope.

Joining a clinical trial can be a good way to gain access to experimental therapies prior to approval. As Kelly Shanahan, MD, explains, trial entry criteria need to be broadened to include sicker patients and participants who reflect the full diversity of the population that will use a new drug.

Stigma, a well-known barrier for people living with HIV and hepatitis C, can also rear its head in the cancer arena. As described in our feature, the idea that lung cancer is a "self-inflicted" illness has repercussions for all lung cancer patients, whether they're current smokers, former smokers or never smoked.

Finally, a major barrier to access for people with cancer is the high cost of new therapies. Financial navigator Megan Pienta explains how she helps people pay for cancer treatment. Equitable access is also important for related care such as scalp cooling to prevent hair loss. Efforts like those of HairToStay can help level the playing field.

But ultimately, the rising cost of health care must be addressed at the national level. This will be a big issue in upcoming elections as patients, providers, payers and politicians struggle to find innovative political solutions that match the innovations we've seen in medical science.

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