Your Own Cancer Drug Expert

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Oncology pharmacists have specialized knowledge about the medications used to fight cancer, manage complications and minimize side effects. They work with physicians, nurses and other medical staff and directly with people in treatment.

What is an oncology pharmacist? How are you different from a regular pharmacist?

I don't work in a traditional setting, such as a drugstore or hospital, preparing prescriptions. Instead, I work in a medical oncology clinic alongside doctors, nurse practitioners and registered nurses, and I interact directly with patients throughout their treatment.

More and more, cancer interventions are given outside of the hospital, in these outpatient facilities. You come in, see the doctor, get the treatment and then go home. It is very important that you understand how to take the medications, including supportive medications to manage side effects. That's where I come in.

Because I am in the clinic, I am readily available to answer your questions and provide information in a timely manner. I'll inform you about the side effects of treatment and work with you and your family to make sure you understand how to lessen adverse effects.

What kinds of care do you provide?

I make sure you are educated so you have a better idea of what to expect during your treatment. For example, medications are prescribed to treat nausea that can be a side effect of chemotherapy. You will need to know how to take them, when to take them, where to get them and how to pay for them.

Just as importantly, I'll help you understand what to do and who to call if any of your prescribed medications don't work as expected.

What are the challenges you have in your work?

The cost of health care is a major obstacle for many. I am here to help you. For example, insurance companies may deny coverage for some medications. And even when they pay, you may find that the co-pay or out-of-pocket portion is more than you can afford.

Part of the care I give is to advocate for the patient. I talk with various people and departments to appeal coverage denials. If you don’t have enough money to pay your share, I will help you find and apply for financial assistance to help take away that worry.

What do you find to be the most inspiring part of your work?

The best-case scenario is when patients come back and thank me for saving their lives and helping to put them in remission. In other cases where the patient is not expected to go into remission, I hope that I contributed to prolonging a life and, more importantly, improving the quality of that life.

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