Cancer Health 25: Don S. Dizon, MD

Promoting sexual health and supportive care after cancer treatment for people of all genders and sexual identities

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The Cancer Health 25 is an annual list that honors individuals who have made a difference in the lives of people with cancer. This year's theme is quality of life. To see the full list, click here.

Don Dizon, MD, specializes in women's cancers, but to many, he's best known for his work promoting sexual health after cancer treatment for both women and men, his advocacy for LGBTQ people living with cancer and his robust social media presence.

Dizon, 52, attended medical school at the University of Rochester, did his residency at Yale and trained in medical oncology at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. He founded the Center for Sexuality, Intimacy, and Fertility at Women & Infants Hospital of Rhode Island and the Sexual Health Clinic at Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center. He is currently director of women's cancers and founder of the Sexual Health First Responders Clinic at the Lifespan Cancer Institute, director of medical oncology at Rhode Island Hospital and a professor of medicine at the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University.

People with cancer may experience sexual problems ranging from a lack of desire to concerns about body image to pain or functional impairment due to surgery or medications. As many as 50% to 90% of people treated for cancer have sexual complications, Dizon explained on a Conquer Cancer podcast he cohosts. “We can work through it to try to find a place to start to unpack what’s just happened, but, really, it’s the validation that’s so important.” Communication is key, as patients are often hesitant to ask their providers about sexual concerns, and doctors often don’t bring them up. “You should not have to give up your sexual health because of cancer,” Dizon told the American Journal of Managed Care.

A gay man himself, Dizon is on a mission to make oncology clinical trials more inclusive of LGBTQ people. “I think if we want to really, fully embrace equity, it’s something we need to do as a specialty,” he said on the podcast. One area in particular that needs more research: how to manage gender-affirming hormone therapy for transgender people with hormone-driven cancers.

“Accessing medical care has always been this very tricky dance, even for someone like me, because, really, the forms are always: ‘What’s the mom’s name and what’s the father’s name’? So every time you’re meeting a new doctor, you’re disclosing,” says Dizon, who is married with three children. “[You’re] seeing a new doctor for something as serious [as cancer] and you’re wondering whether your identity is going to influence how they treat you.”

Dizon recognizes the importance of direct communication between patients, doctors and researchers, and he does his part as an active user of Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and Facebook. He also writes columns for the American Society of Clinical Oncology and The Oncologist and has authored hundreds of scientific publications. Dizon chairs the Digital Engagement Committee of SWOG Cancer Research Network and is a founding member of the Collaboration for Outcomes in Social Media in Oncology (COSMO), which formed in 2015 as an association of people who recognize the potential for online interaction to positively affect patient and physician education and public health.

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