Cancer Health 25: Maryam Lustberg, MD, MPH

Improving quality of life for people with cancer through side effect management and supportive care

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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.

Maryam Lustberg, MD, MPH, is a national leader in supportive care for people with cancer, which includes alleviation of cancer symptoms, prevention or reduction of treatment side effects and improved communication between patients and their providers and caregivers.

The director of the Breast Center at Smilow Cancer Hospital and chief of breast medical oncology and an associate professor of medicine at the Yale Cancer Center, Lustberg, 47, is recognized for her patient-focused care. In fact, Forbes rates her one of the top breast oncologists in the nation. She attended the University of Maryland School of Medicine, where she also did her residency, and completed fellowships at Ohio State University, where she started her career.

Lustberg specializes in improving long-term outcomes for breast cancer patients who have developed side effects from treatment. The benefit is really twofold, she told Yale News. “One is

that if they can tolerate their treatments better, then their quality of life is better. And secondarily, if they're able to stay on treatment longer and not have adverse reactions, then that actually helps their cancer outcomes as well."

One vexing side effect is chemotherapy-induced peripheral neuropathy, nerve damage that can lead to debilitating pain and numbness in the feet and hands. Lustberg's team is working to identify blood-based biomarkers for neuropathy so that the condition can be detected and managed sooner.

But Lustberg's interests extend beyond managing side effects to encompass a broader vision of supportive care. She is president of the Multinational Association of Supportive Care in Cancer (as of June 25, 2022), a member of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) Patient and Survivor Care Education Committee and an associate editor for the Journal of Cancer Survivorship.

"Supportive care aims to prevent and manage adverse effects of cancer and its treatment across the entire disease continuum," Lustberg and colleagues wrote in a publication of the American Society of Clinical Oncology. "Research and clinical experience in dedicated centers have demonstrated that early appropriate supportive care interventions improve symptoms, quality of life and overall survival in a cost-effective manner." It also includes ongoing support for survivors. "When treatment ends for some patients with early-stage breast cancer, they go on to live decades and decades after their original diagnosis," Lustberg says. "Some of them continue to have side effects from that initial treatment."

Lustberg collaborates with national patient advocacy organizations with a focus on improving shared decision-making and increasing patient engagement in clinical trials. She is also known for her mentorship of up-and-coming oncologists.

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