

Important Questions for Improving Cancer Care

The National Comprehensive Cancer Network's annual conference focused on better treatment, human connection and more. Here's a roundup.

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The National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) 2023 Annual Conference took place in-person in Orlando and virtually, with a particular focus on human connection. That connection was underscored with more than 2,000 registrants from across the continuum of cancer care, including approximately 1,000 who returned in-person for the first time since 2019. Educational sessions highlighted the importance of ensuring care meets the latest standards while also rejecting a one-size-fits-all approach.

"At NCCN, we don't shy away from difficult discussions; we want our conference attendees to take away the message that it is not just okay, but imperative to ask tough questions," said Robert W. Carlson, MD, chief executive officer, NCCN. "The experts behind the evidence-based updates in the NCCN Guidelines have an opportunity to discuss their recommendations with the care providers who follow them. This year's program included multiple sessions dedicated to finding solutions for challenges, such as systemic bias, social determinants of health, and staffing issues, that can reduce people's access to the best possible cancer care."

One question that came up again and again was: "Who are we missing?" This was examined during a plenary session on Best Practices for Addressing the Health Needs of the LGBTQ+ Community in Oncology Care, where speakers highlighted the lack of data on sexual orientation and gender identity in people with cancer. Panel participants also discussed how experiences with bias and misunderstanding can make people reluctant to engage with necessary health care. There can be added complications for people who have faced rejection from their biological family, or hardships like food insecurity or a lack of safe spaces in their community.

"People will come to you if you let them know that it's safe for them to come to you," explained Shail Maingi, MD, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, while discussing how to alleviate mistrust. "If your practice shows it is affirming and can do trauma-informed care, people will travel from all over to see you. When I walk into a room, I don't make assumptions about who is with the patient. And at the end of the encounter, I always ask 'is there anything more you want to talk about?'"

The question of "Who are we missing?" came up again in multiple sessions focused on increasing

equity in cancer care. Topics included: Programs to Reduce Hospital Admissions and Readmissions; Sexual Identity and Function in Patients with Cancer and Survivors; Cancer Screening in Underrepresented Populations; and Social Determinants of Health: Collection, Integration, and Intervention.

In another plenary session—this one focused on Sleep Disorders, Fatigue, and Cognitive Function in Cancer Survivors—speakers again noted a lack of data. The panelists explained that there is good evidence that physical activity can help with cancer-related fatigue. But when it comes to other interventions dealing with sleep disorders and cognitive impairment, a lot more research is needed. Panelists also cautioned: “These are individualized experiences that require individualized consultation with the patient and provider.”

Reducing staff burnout and turnover is another area where asking the right question can go a long way. In a plenary session on Health System Recruitment and Retention Strategies, speakers pointed out how the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused everyone to reassess their lives and priorities. It also accelerated an already-looming workforce shortage in oncology. The panel participants found that the best way to retain high-value employees was to listen to them, support their needs, and keep them on a path that was both challenging and fulfilling.

“We want to make sure that we start that conversation on day one of employment and even earlier during interviews. We discuss not just the job expectations, but also ask ‘what do you really want, where do you see yourself in the future, and what are your long-term goals?’ Making a connection with the individual employee is important and keeping that ongoing connection is critical,” said Rebecca L. Caires, MBA, Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center of Northwestern University, a member of the NCCN Board of Directors.

The NCCN 2023 Annual Conference also featured many discussions about the latest research from the past year, and how expert NCCN Guidelines Panel Members use it to inform current clinical practice recommendations. Attendees were invited to “Continue the Conversation” in small group settings for informal discussions immediately following some of the sessions.

The conference included more than 100 abstract poster presentations featuring original research data in a variety of oncology-related categories, which are now available at [JNCCN.org](https://www.jnccn.org), the online home of JNCCN—Journal of the National Comprehensive Cancer Network. “Follow the Experts” guided tours delved deeper into dozens of poster abstracts showcasing cutting-edge research on cancer treatment and delivery. There were oral presentations for the top five highest-scoring abstracts, and NCCN Foundation Young Investigator Awards recipients also showcased oral presentations on their findings.

For those attending in-person, there were also numerous opportunities for networking in the live Exhibit Hall and at a poolside reception.

Save the date: NCCN will return to the Marriott World Center in Orlando for the [NCCN 2024 Annual Conference](#) April 5—7, 2024. Before then, there will be two NCCN Policy Summits and one NCCN Patient Advocacy Summit in Washington, D.C., and the NCCN 2023 Annual Congress: [Hematologic](#)

[Malignancies](#) in San Francisco September 22—23, 2023. Visit [NCCN.org](https://www.nccn.org) for a full calendar of upcoming events.

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