A Research Roadshow Brings a University Cancer Center to a Cancer-Challenged Community

University of Colorado cancer researchers and outreach specialists travel to Pueblo to share information on studies, screening, and more.

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Cancer is personal for Nancy Gius. So when a team from the University of Colorado Cancer Center came to Pueblo, Colorado, on June 13 to talk about research, she jumped at the chance to "learn more and get educated," she said.

"My mother died of lung cancer, and it wasn't due to smoking," said Gius, a longtime Pueblo resident. "However, she was a maid and she used a lot of chemicals. Plus we grew up five blocks away from the CF&I" — the local steel mill.

Gius also talked of pollution from Pueblo's former coke plant, which produced a fuel from coal that was used in smelting metals. "My grandmother would hang out our white sheets, and if they let all of those gases and smoke out from the coke plant, that stuff was just all over the sheets. So what did that do to our lungs?"

Pueblo County has one of the highest cancer incidence rates in Colorado as well as higher-than-average rates of heart disease and respiratory ailments. Elevated levels of various heavy metals have been found in Pueblo's topsoils. And, as Gius noted, Pueblo is home to many older people, a population at greater risk of cancer.

For reasons like these, Gius and other attendees said they were pleased to have the CU Cancer Center in her community as part of the Research Roadshow, a traveling series of outreach events led by the Multidisciplinary Center on Aging at the CU Anschutz Medical Campus. The roadshows are held in far-flung communities across Colorado.

The June 13 Research Roadshow was held in a ballroom at Pueblo Community College. The next roadshow is planned for Aug. 15 in Greeley, followed by Steamboat Springs in the fall and an undetermined Eastern Plains community after that.

‘We want them to feel valued’

“The purpose of the roadshow is to connect research with community members,” said Jan Lowery, PhD, MPH, assistant director for dissemination and implementation for the CU Cancer Center’s Office of Community Outreach and Engagement (COE). “Researchers get to come here and share what they’re doing with the public, and potentially they can enroll people in their studies.”

Outreach across Colorado is a core element of the CU Cancer Center’s mission as a National Cancer Institute-designated comprehensive cancer center, and participation in events like the Research Roadshow furthers that goal, Lowery said. “We want people statewide to feel more a part of the process, and more involved in research. We want them to feel valued.”

Both older adults and residents of rural areas are underrepresented in cancer clinical trials, Lowery added, so roadshow participation helps the CU Cancer Center in its efforts to broaden participation in studies in rural areas and in underrepresented communities. It’s also a chance to share local resources to help Pueblo’s cancer survivors and to encourage community members to seek cancer screening.

Cancer wasn’t the event’s only topic. Elsewhere in the ballroom, participants could meet an audiologist to get a free hearing test and hear presentations on veterans’ health issues, arthritis, cognition, and other health topics.

In 2024, five Research Roadshows were held across Colorado, drawing a total of 797 participants.

Focus on Pueblo

Among the many information tables scattered across the ballroom, a popular destination was the station where Tin Tin Su, PhD, co-leader of the CU Cancer Center Molecular and Cellular Oncology program, and members of her research team were on hand to present their work. Su is investigating the cancer impact of various heavy metals in Pueblo’s soils.

At the display, Marcus Richards, a PhD student on Su’s team, gave passersby a lively presentation on the research team’s findings, joined by Barb Frederick, PhD, a post-doc research associate in Su’s lab.

Nearby, Lowery walked visitors through the CU Cancer Center’s new ECCO mapping platform that tracks cancer and other health data across the state. Laurie Cardin, a member of the COE office’s Community Advisors for Research Equity in Science (COE-CARES) council, talked about the nonprofit Gynecologic Cancer Connection’s monthly Pueblo Gyno Cancer Lunch Break for survivors.

Jeanette Waxmonsky, PhD, appointed last year as the cancer center’s assistant director of community-engaged research, discussed improving cancer care for rural residents. And Adela

Cota-Gomez, PhD, assistant director for Cancer Research Training and Education Coordination, presented a display of side-by-side models of human lungs, one healthy, the other blackened from smoking.

At another table, Jacob Dawson, a professional research assistant, explained the CU Cancer Center's Bfit Bwell exercise program for people undergoing cancer treatment or recently out of treatment, which he said "can benefit cancer patients and survivors with physical function, fatigue, and a host of other symptoms."

Dawson added: "In science, we often gather our data from large urban areas, and not on purpose, but we often end up excluding members of rural communities. And so hopefully, by being here today, we can get them to engage and get them into our science."

'Just fantastic'

Seated together were three COE office team members greeting attendees: Principal community outreach and engagement coordinators Karely Villarreal Hernandez, MPH, and Tatiana Gerena, MPH, along with bilingual patient navigator Samantha Garcia. Their mission was to help the CU Cancer Center connect with the diverse communities of Pueblo, a city where nearly half the population is Hispanic, and to make information about research more accessible. They also distributed free FIT tests for colorectal cancer screening as well as radon testing kits. Radon is second only to smoking as a cause of lung cancer.

"I'm passionate about serving all our communities and getting them access to health care resources that they might not otherwise be aware of," said Garcia, an oncology patient navigator credentialed by the American Cancer Society. "We're reaching people with disparities in access to health care, whether it's distance to a health care facility, not knowing how to access resources, or even if they should ask for those resources."

Among the attendees were Bernadine Geiger and her husband, Jerry, of Pueblo. Bernadine said they found the roadshow "extremely informative" and made connections that may help in the treatment of family members with medical issues. Added Jerry: "Talking to everyone around here was just fantastic."

Danna Dimmick of Pueblo said she came "to learn something about cancer that I don't know. There's always new information. My dad passed away from cancer. So now I try to find out what I can to keep everyone in my family healthy."

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