New Program Aims to Bring Prevention to the Forefront

Streamlining is key when it comes to the Smilow Cancer Genetics and Prevention Program and their mission to be at the forefront of patient care at Smilow Cancer Hospital. With plans to move into a new suite on the Saint Raphael’s campus this summer, the Program will now have exam rooms where patients can meet with physicians and counselors together and focus on preventative measures based on an individual’s family history and genetics. Under the leadership of Erin Hofstatter, MD and Xavier Llor, MD, PhD, Co-Directors of the Program, all services related to high-risk families will be incorporated into one comprehensive program, including not only genetic counseling and testing, but also an integration of all aspects of care.

The Cancer Genetics and Prevention Program consists of geneticists, genetic counselors, physicians, and nurses working together with the goal of providing cancer risk assessment and taking steps to prevent the development of cancer. Patients are referred either through self-referral, or more commonly, by a physician that has identified them as possibly high-risk based on certain criteria.

Although programs like the one at Smilow are not standard of care yet, they hope to be an example for other centers by demonstrating the effect that prevention plans can have on outcomes. “There is a lack of awareness by some providers and families are falling through the cracks,” said Dr. Llor. “We are committed to educating families and their providers to identify who may benefit from a cancer genetics evaluation. Once they are on the radar, our team can follow-up with them as needed.”

Dr. Hofstatter commented that when a patient comes to her with a diagnosis of breast cancer and a mutation is found, it feels like a missed opportunity for prevention. Even if a woman is found not to have a mutation but is still considered high-risk, there are preventative steps that can be taken. Dr. Hofstatter explained that a new term, ‘previvor,’ is being used more often to describe individuals who are living with a predisposition to cancer but who haven’t yet had the disease. This group includes people who carry a hereditary mutation, a family history of cancer, or some other predisposing factor.

“More attention needs to be paid to these ‘previvors’ and their families. We are making huge strides in the treatment of cancer, but there are still toxicities, and no matter what, a cancer diagnosis affects people and their quality of life. In order to put a dent in cancer incidence, prevention needs to be a part of the conversation, not an afterthought once a diagnosis has been made,” said Dr. Hofstatter.

Karina Brierley, MS, is Chief Genetic Counselor for the Cancer Genetics and Prevention Program and meets with patients that are considered high-risk based on personal and family history. She explained that each cancer program within Smilow will have a Program Leader assigned to identifying patients that might be high-risk. For example, Dr. Llor will work within the Gastrointestinal Cancers Program and patients with colon cancer, and Dr. Hofstatter as part of the Breast Program for breast and ovarian cancers.

Ms. Brierley commented, “Genetic testing is getting more complicated as more genes and mutations are discovered. Hereditary colon cancer is now the second biggest mutation we test for, but breast and ovarian are still the largest population of patients. Our physicians see patients with an array of diseases and therefore, our testing becomes more diverse as well. It is not uncommon for us to see rare hereditary cancers either.”

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that one-third of all cancer cases are preventable. “People with a strong family history, or that have tested positive for a mutation, don’t want to wait around thinking there is nothing they can do, they want a plan,” said Dr. Hofstatter. Whether it is following a patient with screening, referring them to the Smoking Cessation Program, or a nutritionist to talk about diet and exercise, the goal ultimately is to provide the resources and options needed so that cancer never becomes an issue.

Prevention and genetics are becoming a vital part of patient care at Smilow. The hope is to include new research and develop clinical trials for families that are found to carry a mutation, and those with a strong family history as well. “Using this method,” said Dr. Llor, “we hope to eradicate the predisposing factors that cause cancer to grow, thereby stopping cancer in its tracks. There is a lot of potential here and we plan to hit the ground running.”

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