Caring For Our Veterans

The Veterans Affairs (VA) Comprehensive Cancer Center in West Haven, an affiliate of Yale Cancer Center, serves veterans throughout Connecticut and southern New England. Each year it cares for about 600 new cases of vets diagnosed with cancer.

“We have almost all the specialties of surgery,” said Michal G. Rose, MD, Director of the VA Cancer Center, “and we offer almost all types of chemotherapy and biological therapy.” The West Haven VA was also among the first in the country to do robotic surgeries for various cancers in the lung, prostate, head, and neck. The hospital provides a full array of support services, including social workers, care coordinators, and a hospice team. "The one thing we do not offer is radiation therapy, “ she said.

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She began the program soon after becoming director in 2005. She noticed that some patients were falling through the cracks because of the complications of cancer care—the many appointments and tests, the many disciplines involved—could overwhelm patients who had psychosocial problems or little family support. Dr. Rose combined the VA’s excellent electronic medical records system with a new software program that analyzes each day’s list of scans and flags any that suggest cancer. Each morning, a care coordinator makes sure that every flagged patient gets scheduled for any required services. The coordinator also becomes the veteran’s contact person throughout the cycle of care, lessening anxiety and delays. "Patients get diagnosed and staged quicker,” said Dr. Rose.

One area where cancer care for veterans has lagged is enrollment in clinical trials. Recent data showed that veterans are less likely than other populations to have this opportunity. Early diagnosis is critical, and Dr. Rose is especially pleased with the VA’s screening program for lung cancer, which has assessed more than 3,000 patients. "We’ve been able to do that because we have such a good care coordination program,” she said. “We were the first VA to offer it. You won’t find it anywhere else, really, to the extent that we’re doing it.”

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