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Editorial | Our View

Isles need links to cancer centers

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Just about everyone knows someone who has heard the life-rattling words: “You have cancer.” This year, there will be an estimated 6,850 new cases in Hawaii, according to the American Cancer Society’s projections.

Nationwide, cancer is the second most common cause of death, exceeded only by heart disease, and accounts for nearly 1 of every 4 deaths. Among Asian-American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander populations, however, cancer is the leading cause of death.

A new partnership that will help Hawaii Pacific Health expand and improve upon its cancer care programs, therefore, is welcome news.

The parent company of Kapiolani Medical Center for Women & Children, Pali Momi Medical Center, Straub Clinic & Hospital and Wilcox Health on Kauai is now a member of the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance (SCCA) Affiliate Network. SCCA has 13 affiliate members, with all but HPH in the Pacific Northwest. SCCA includes cancer specialists and researchers at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, Seattle Children’s Hospital and the University of Washington School of Medicine.

“This partnership will enhance existing programs in Hawaii, and give our patients the best opportunity to stay home here in Hawaii for their cancer care where they can benefit from the support of their families and friends, which has been proven to facilitate the recovery and healing process,” said Dr. James Kakuda, surgical oncologist and chief medical officer, Pali Momi Medical Center.

“Patients in Hawaii will be able to access cutting-edge clinical trials here in Hawaii that were previously only available on the mainland.”

Also, the partnership, announced last week, is expected to bring relief to families seeking treatments available only on the mainland.

While getting treatment in Seattle they’ll be able to keep their islands-based doctors in the loop. For example, HPH doctors will have access to SCCA health records and may consult on patient care in real time with SCCA providers, Kakuda said.

Among treatments not available in Hawaii: adult bone marrow transplants, the use of “investigational” drugs and proton beam therapy. “Some treatments, such as proton beam therapy, require very expensive infrastructure that is cost prohibitive here in Hawaii where we have a small population and the frequency of using this technology would not make it feasible,” Kakuda said.

The partnership will include the University of Hawaii Cancer Center, too: Its new director, Dr. Randall Holcombe, said UH researchers could partner on projects involving cancer care delivery and population-based cancer prevention. That’s encouraging news for a center struggling to find its financial footing and working to retain its standing as a National Cancer Institute-designated entity.

Ranked among the top 10 by U.S. News & World Report, the Seattle group specializes in stem cell and bone marrow transplants, genetic profiling, and population health — a focus on “health outcomes” of a group.

“As it relates to cancer care, it (population health) aims to improve prevention, screening and early detection of cancer while providing evidenced-based practices for the treatment of cancer,” Kakuda said.

According to the cancer society’s latest national figures, in the case of breast cancer, due to improvements in early detection and treatment, death rates declined by 36 percent from 1989 to 2012, resulting in the avoidance of some 249,000 cancer deaths. In Hawaii, breast cancer is among the top cancer threats, with an estimated 1,130 new cases expected this year.

Regardless of where one lives, such a diagnosis comes with harsh realities tied to treatment and mortality. Contending with those issues while rooted in the mid-Pacific’s relative isolation can, no doubt, intensify stress.

The HPH-Seattle partnership, if executed as envisioned, establishes a valuable link between the islands and the mainland’s more plentiful resources for cancer care efforts.