

SUPPORTING PATIENTS AND PROVIDERS: Q & A WITH MANNY ORTEGA, PATIENT NAVIGATOR

Patient navigation supports patients and families to ensure timely access to diagnostic and cancer care services throughout the MaineHealth Cancer Care Network. The overall purpose is to assist the patient with ongoing support, advocacy, education, resources and informed decision making as he or she moves through the various phases of cancer care.

Manuel “Manny” Ortega Jr., MSN, RN, Surgical Oncology/Thyroid Patient Navigator, shares his role with the surgical team and with patients. He works closely with Tim Fitzgerald, MD, Director of Maine Medical Center’s Surgical Oncology Program.



Q. HOW DOES THE NAVIGATOR SUPPORT THE SURGEON AND THE PATIENT?

Ortega: Navigators understand the fears and frustrations of patients facing surgical intervention as part of their treatment plan. We work collaboratively with patients, families and the surgical team to ensure that the unique challenges of every case are met. Navigators strive to personalize care and to help patients receive quality-driven care that is closest to home. Our aim is also to inform patients about what to expect before, during and after surgery, which helps alleviate some of their anxiety. My work as a surgical oncology nurse also helps me to anticipate the specific needs of this patient population.

Q. WHAT IS IMPORTANT FOR PRIMARY CARE PHYSICIANS TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR WORK WITH DR. FITZGERALD AND OTHER SURGEONS?

Ortega: Navigators serve as a direct connection to surgeons and work hand in hand with referring physicians to quickly facilitate transitions of care. For example, we are able to receive referrals and work to expedite consultations and ultimately surgery as necessary. We become part of a patient’s support network and make referrals to several support services to ensure that patients have no barriers to receive the care that they need. The successes of patient navigation have been the result of patient experience and ongoing physician support.

Q. HOW DO YOU BRIDGE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE SURGEONS, THE PATIENT, AND HIS OR HER OTHER PROVIDERS?

Ortega: A major goal of navigation is to ensure that timely care is received. Patient navigators have access to several electronic health record systems throughout the network and beyond which enables us to quickly access patient records for coordination of care. Referring providers are often called directly by our surgeons after consultation to include them in treatment planning and follow up. As navigators, we also handle all aspects of preparation for site-specific tumor conferences, which adds another layer to the comprehensive review of our patients. Our patients come from diverse socioeconomic, geographic and psychosocial backgrounds, and navigators are well-versed in assisting these patients.

Q. HOW DO YOU HELP PATIENTS TRANSITION BETWEEN TYPES OF TREATMENT AND CARE? HOW DOES THIS IMPACT THE PATIENTS' OUTCOMES?

Ortega: Transitions of care are at the heart of what we as navigators do every day. We work with a large network of providers and navigators to provide support that is most needed during these transitions. Whether it is expediting appointments or providing patients with additional education, patient navigators are there to help with each step of the process. Patients and clinicians have lauded the efforts of navigators as a major reason for seamless and timely cancer care.

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