



# CANCER SERVICES

ANNUAL REPORT | FY23

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# 2023

## CANCER COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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Venumadhav Kotla, MD – Cancer Committee Chairman

Nelson Royall, MD – Cancer Liaison Physician

Jon Horn, MD – Diagnostic Radiologist; Scott Stephen, MD (Alternate)

Ezra Ellis, MD – Pathologist; Sumi So, MD (Alternate)

Fernando Aycinena, MD – Surgeon; Emily Black, MD (Alternate)

Andre Kallab, MD – Medical Oncologist; Andrew Johnson, MD (Alternate)

Craig Baden, MD – Radiation Oncologist; Adnan Elhammali, MD (Alternate)

Andrew Johnson, MD – Cancer Conference Coordinator; Dianne Kosmala, MD (Alternate)

Christina Saurel, MD – Quality Improvement Coordinator; Geoffrey Weidner, MD (Alternate)

Ezra Ellis, MD – Cancer Registry Quality Coordinator; Sumi So, MD (Alternate)

Charles Nash, MD – Clinical Research Coordinator; Holly Jones, PhD (Alternate)

Donna Moss, LCSW, CG-C – Psychosocial Services Coordinator; Debbie Steed, LCSW (Alternate)

Angie Caton, MSN, RN, OCN – Survivorship Program Coordinator; Ashley Deringer, NP (Alternate)

Michele Fortner, MBA, MS, RT (R)(T) – Cancer Program Administrator; Kevin Matson, FACHE (Alternate)

Dianne Kosmala, BA, CTR – Certified Tumor Registrar; Dustonia Call, BA, CTR (Alternate)

Kimberly Tyner-Meeks, RN, OCN – Oncology Nurse; Alicia Harrison, RN (Alternate)

Donna Moss, LCSW, CG-C – Social Worker; Ralph Albes, LCSW (Alternate)

Zameer Gill, MD – Palliative Care Professional

Heather Wilsey, PT, DPT – Rehabilitation Services Professional

Chrissy Williams, RD, LD – Registered Dietician Nutrition

Christopher Jennings – Pastoral Care Professional

Jennifer Butler, NP – Genetics Professional

Ronik Saha, PharmD – Pharmacist

Penny McCall – Oncology Accreditation Coordinator

MaySarih Ndobé – American Cancer Society Representative

# ONCOLOGY

## OUTGOING MEDICAL DIRECTOR

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**Charles Nash III, MD, FACP**

Director of Oncology Research, NGMC

Northeast Georgia Medical Center's (NGMC) Cancer Services Program continues to address the needs of its patients through growth in services, personnel, and technology in 2023. As a truly multidisciplinary regional center, NGMC continues to serve a large population base with facilities in Gainesville, Braselton, Dahlonega, Toccoa, Demorest, and Winder.

With the addition of new oncologic subspecialists in hepatobiliary, pancreatic, pulmonary, and gynecologic oncologic cancers, these disciplines were enhanced by the initiation of regular subspecialty multidisciplinary tumor case conferences in addition to our regular weekly tumor conferences. In these conferences, individual patient care needs and treatment options are discussed to ensure that patients receive the most careful and modern treatment available. New technology was pioneered at NGMC in 2023 including the Ion Robotic bronchoscopy procedure that enables lung nodule biopsy on certain lung masses to aid in diagnosis and to guide therapy. Adoption of artificial intelligence radiology program solutions are in consideration as well to enhance early detection of lung abnormalities.

Starting in early 2023, teams of physicians, administrators and others began the work of establishing standards, policies, procedures, and quality initiatives to seek accreditation of the NGMC breast program by the National Accreditation Program of Breast Centers (NAPBC). This work has been completed in 2023 and provides a structure and resources to assure patients that the breast care team is committed to provision of the best care available throughout their entire course of treatment.

The NGMC Cancer Services team continues to provide a vibrant commitment to cancer research, participating in research in collaboration with the National Cancer Institute, Georgia NCORP (a state-wide cancer research consortium), Georgia Center for Research and Education, and multiple clinical trials in collaboration with pharmaceutical companies to provide access to the latest treatment and diagnostic opportunities. Our staff is recognized at local, state, and national levels for excellence in patient care, research, advocacy, cancer screening, and for multiple publications in the medical literature.

While much has been achieved, there is still much to be accomplished. **We remain committed going forward to our goal of preventing, treating, and eventually curing cancer.** It is our desire and our passion.

# ONCOLOGY

## INCOMING MEDICAL DIRECTOR

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**Andrew Johnson, MD**

Medical Director of Oncology, NGMC

2023 was an exciting year in the field of Hematology and Oncology. There have been many exciting advancements in treatments and technologies to better care for our patients.

This year, I have taken on the role of Medical Director of Oncology at Northeast Georgia Medical Center (NGMC). I would like to thank Charles Nash, MD who has worked as the Medical Director of Oncology at NGMC for over 20 years. He was instrumental in building the Oncology program both at NGMC and the Longstreet Cancer Center. He continues his dedicated service as the Director of Oncology Research at NGMC. Over time, I hope to provide the same lasting impact and leadership that Dr. Nash has provided to the clinic, NGMC, and to all his beloved patients.

Here at NGMC, in collaboration with Longstreet Clinic, we continue to advocate for a multidisciplinary approach for all our cancer patients. Each week, one of several multidisciplinary tumor boards take place where radiologists, pathologists, radiation oncologists, surgeons, medical oncologists, research staff, and other supporting staff all discuss the patients' clinical history, imaging, and pathology. We use this information to derive the best treatment plan for the patient. We feel that a multi-disciplinary approach for all our cancer patients offers a tremendous benefit and allows for consensus recommendations amongst many providers for each case presented. In addition to a general tumor conference that includes all solid tumors including breast cancer, we now have dedicated tumor conferences for pulmonary nodules and thoracic oncology, hepatobiliary cancers, as well as gynecologic malignancies.

We can offer patients both cutting edge clinical trials and the most advanced standard of care treatment options. Our team remains dedicated to providing high quality evidence-based therapy using the most recent data to support our decision making. The landscape of Hematology and Oncology changes rapidly. We remain dedicated to providing the most up to date therapy options for our patients.

In 2023, there has been an incredible increase in the number of medical therapies available to our patients. There continues to be an ongoing expansion to the indications for immunotherapy and targeted therapy in both Benign and Malignant Hematology as well as Medical Oncology. Immunotherapy defines a group of medications that allow for your immune system to recognize a cancer cell as foreign and attack it. There have been numerous exciting immunotherapy combinations that have been found to be synergistic and improve outcomes for patients across different tumor types. Targeted therapy refers to using a molecular marker as a target to fight cancer. This is also defined as precision medicine, using DNA level changes to guide our therapeutic decision making. In 2023, targeted therapy has been approved in breast cancer targeting resistant mutations such as ESR1 and PIK3CA. Additional new targeted therapy for cancers such as cholangiocarcinoma (cancer of the bile ducts) harboring FGFR2 fusions now have medications to target these abnormalities. These have greatly improved outcomes for patients suffering from these conditions.

We are excited about the coming year and the **wonderful team assembled through collaboration** with NGMC and Longstreet Clinic. We all are dedicated to improving the lives of patients in our community.

# DIRECTOR REPORT

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**Michele Fortner, MBA, MS, RT(R)(T)**

Director of Oncology Services, NGMC

Northeast Georgia Medical Center's (NGMC) Cancer Services Report is a comprehensive summary of the cancer-related work and activities completed over the course of the year. The cancer team is comprised of a large multidisciplinary group of highly committed and knowledgeable professionals who provide a wide range of cancer care services, starting from cancer screening through cancer survivorship.

Significant strides in breast care were made this year with the development and implementation of many new protocols. The program now meets all the standards required by the National Accreditation Program for Breast Centers (NAPBC) and will be eligible to apply for this accreditation in early 2025, after a year of having these standards in place.

Another major focus of the program is the development of a lung nodule pathway. This pathway is designed to shift the number of late-stage lung cancers to earlier stage diagnoses, thereby improving the chance of cure. It will be a valuable addition to the low-dose cancer screening program and the chest board team that reviews scans with findings and makes recommendation for next steps.

The program has also added two additional specialty tumor conferences this year. One focuses on cancers of the liver, pancreas, and biliary systems, while the other focuses on breast cancer. The program continues with the specific gynecologic conference as well as the multidisciplinary conference.

The cancer program has invested significantly in capital equipment this year. The second linear accelerator added in the Braselton Cancer Center has enhanced features for beam targeting, imaging, motion management, and patient positioning. Together, these features create the added precision required to treat even the smallest tumors with high doses, while minimizing dose to normal structures. Another addition to the equipment is a robotic system used in biopsies of lung nodules. In early 2024, the program will also be adding a special piece of equipment that will use ultrasound in a new way to treat unresectable liver tumors.

## IN CONCLUSION

NGMC's Cancer services team **has accomplished a lot in 2023 and will continue working together to provide the highest quality cancer care to our community.**

# HEPATO-PANCREATO-BILIARY SURGERY

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**Nelson Royall, MD**

Hepato-Pancreato-Biliary Surgeon, NGMC

The 2023 year was significant for the Northeast Georgia Medical Center (NGMC) Cancer Program. There was continued rapid growth of existing services provided, including the new Hepato-Pancreato-Biliary Surgery program. As a nationally recognized cancer center, our program has continued to meet and exceed national standards across all aspects of cancer care.

This year, our program continued to progress towards an NAPBC accreditation for Breast Cancer care under the guidance of Priscilla Strom, MD and Emily Black, MD. This preeminent recognition will further establish the NGMC cancer center as the definitive site for breast cancer care in the region and one of a select group of recognized Breast Cancer centers in the United States.

With the addition of Karen Gersch, MD we have introduced a new effort to drastically redefine lung cancer care in our community. Our cancer program has been developing new standards for lung cancer screening and management. These changes will improve access and reliability of early lung cancer detection within the community. The lung cancer program this year added cutting-edge minimally invasive techniques including the Ion robotic-bronchoscopy platform and robotic lung cancer surgery program under the guidance of Dr. Gersch and April McDonald, MD. The center has also embarked on a national lung cancer initiative aimed at dramatically improving lung cancer surgery survival to further improve cancer care for our community.

The Hepato-Pancreato-Biliary Surgery and GI Surgical Oncology program has grown significantly since its inception at NGMC in 2022. In addition to welcoming Terence Jackson, MD to the program, the center has initiated the first Hepato-Pancreato-Biliary multidisciplinary tumor board aimed at improving the cancer care for patients with liver, biliary, and pancreatic cancers in the community. Under the guidance of the cancer

research services, our program has initiated three new national clinical trials focused on improved cancer care for these patients. As a highlight, the OPT-IN trial (EA 2197) was created to identify the ideal method for providing chemotherapy and surgery to high-risk gallbladder cancer patients. While the A02186 trial is designed to develop better chemotherapy and surgery techniques for early-stage pancreatic cancer. Another achievement has been the development of a new initiative aimed at improving identification of genetic mutations in pancreatic cancer patients, which will allow novel treatments for patients with this aggressive cancer.

Our program has welcomed several milestones this year, including the first totally robotic esophagectomy, gastrectomy, and pancreatoduodenectomy procedures at NGMC under the leadership of our surgery team. With these achievements, our center becomes one of the only centers in the United States to offer these minimally invasive surgery techniques for these cancer patients. Finally, we are excited to announce that our center has become one of 19 centers in the United States to collaborate with the HistoSonics platform to offer histotripsy, a new non-invasive treatment for liver tumors, to our community. This is a tremendous accomplishment that will be the first and only center in the state and region to offer this therapy for patients with otherwise untreatable liver tumors, providing hope to our community.

These achievements represent a small sample of the overall amazing work being done by our healthcare team and leadership to further establish NGMC as the preeminent cancer center in the region. Looking back on the lives we have been fortunate to impact, we are honored to continue to focus on advancing cancer care through research, education, and patient care. Thank you for this opportunity and we look forward to another year of improving the care of our community in all that we do.

# TUMOR REGISTRAR REPORT



**Jamiee Woods**  
Oncology Data Specialist, NGMC



**Teresa Horton**  
Oncology Data Specialist, NGMC

In 2023, there were many changes to the registry team. The new lead registrar, Jaimee Woods, abstracts remotely from Ohio. Also, newly hired remote abstractor Nila Thomas, from Pennsylvania, has many years of abstracting for rural Georgia hospitals. Additionally, our on-site abstractor, Teresa Horton, passed the certification exam. To help with short and long term follow up, case findings, and tumor conferences, we added a registry assistant, Lisa Norton, who works remotely from Toccoa.

In 2021, our cancer services program had 2,805 analytic cases of cancer. When comparing the data from 2020 to 2021, there was an increase of 390 total cases. Most of the increases in cancer cases were realized in the top 5 cancer sites for Northeast Georgia Medical Center (NGMC). Breast,

lung, prostate, colon/rectum, and corpus uteri saw increased volumes while there were decreased volumes for thyroid cancer.

In 142 cancer conferences during 2023, there were 688 cases presented to interdisciplinary teams. Weekly Hepatobiliary/Pancreas conferences and bi-monthly GYN Oncology conferences were added in 2023 to accommodate the growing populations of patients in those specialties. Attendance and participation at all cancer conferences has been robust. We are grateful to all who attend cancer conferences, present cases, and those who work behind the scenes to help our patients receive the best care possible.

IN  
2021



BREAST CASES  
**INCREASED**

**24%**



LUNG CASES  
**INCREASED**

**16.8%**



PROSTATE CASES  
**INCREASED**

**24%**



COLON & RECTUM  
CASES **INCREASED**

**16.5%**



CORPUS UTERI  
**INCREASED**

**36.4%**



THYROID CASES  
**DECREASED**

**8.3%**



# ONCOLOGY RESEARCH



## Holly Jones, Ph.D.

Director of Research Administration,  
NGMC

Northeast Georgia Health System (NGHS) plays a vital role in improving the health of our community by offering services that support our patients and local families with cancer prevention, cancer care, and survivorship activities. Throughout 2023, we maintained our commitment to offering the highest level of care and cutting-edge therapies for patients in our community. We led innovative research studies and impactful clinical trials that offered new options in cancer diagnosis and treatment for our patients. We prioritized safety as our primary goal to ensure that our patients had access to the quality cancer care that they require. We invested in new state-of-the-art technology and partnered with Guardian Research Network, a non-profit organization and nationwide health system consortium to launch a new patient identification and clinical trial matching system that allows for patients to be matched with our available enrolling clinical trials at the time of diagnosis. By participating in clinical trials and research, we offer our patients breakthrough new drug and medical device therapies with a goal of improving cancer care for all patients throughout the world. Through research, our team has access to an international community of expert cancer clinicians with whom we can collaborate to ensure that we utilize the latest techniques and most recent discoveries to improve patient care now and for generations to come.

In 2023, we offered patients the opportunity to participate in more than 30 clinical trials involving **some of the most promising, breakthrough new cancer therapies**. For over 25 years, our expert **physician specialists** in medical, surgical, radiation and gynecologic oncology have offered leading trials involving new pharmaceutical agents and treatment methods for virtually all tumor sites including breast, lung and prostate cancers, which are three of the cancer types most often diagnosed.

We maintained our commitment to offering the highest level of care and cutting-edge therapies for patients in our community

We expanded our clinical trial portfolio to include new enrollments in several new drug treatment trials addressing outcomes in cancer types such as breast, lung, colorectal, as well as novel first-line treatments for ovarian cancer and lung cancer.

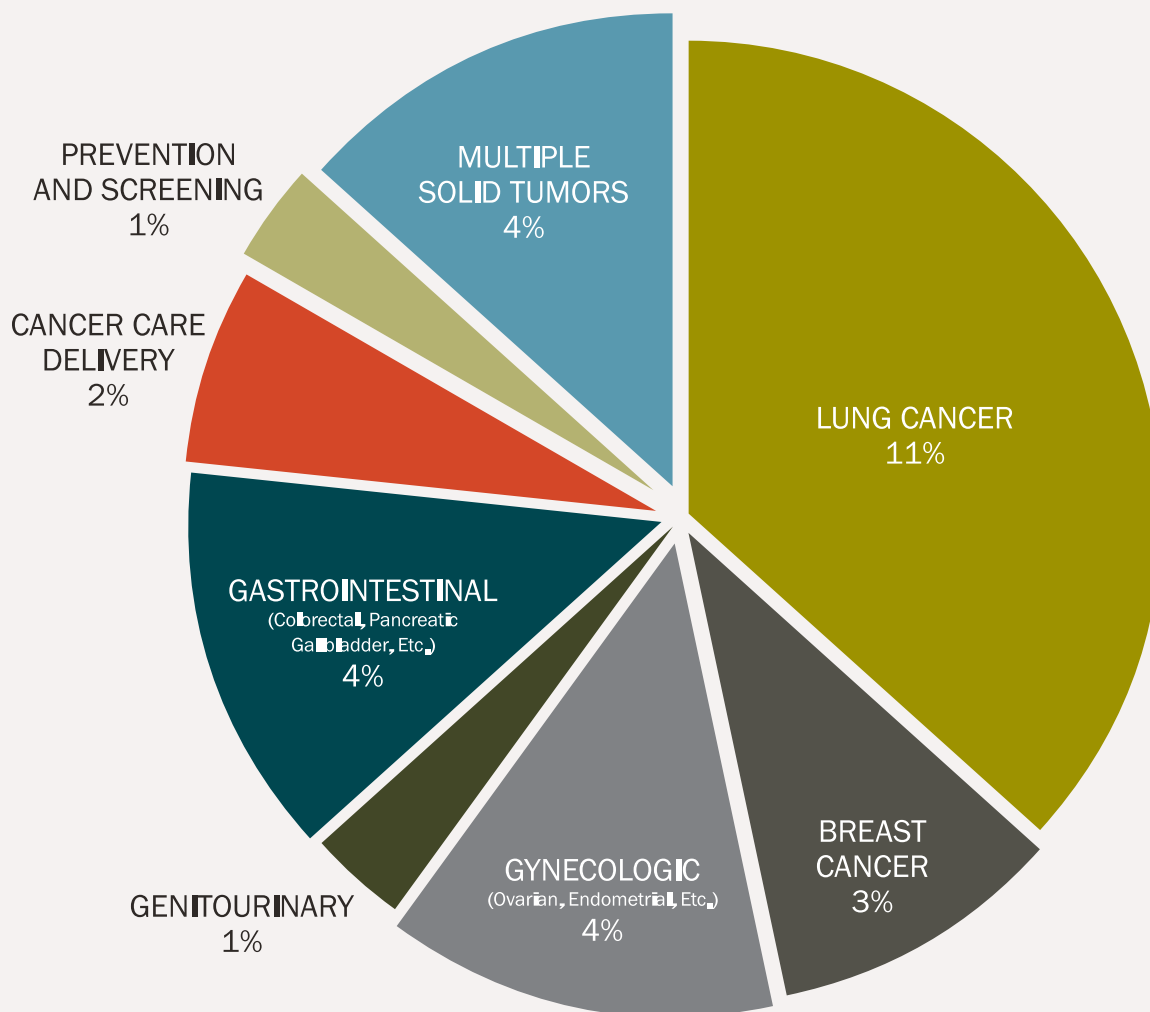
We met and exceeded the research standard requirements for our American College of Surgeons Commission on Cancer (CoC) accreditation. Our clinical trial portfolio will grow over the next year to include new industry sponsored drug treatment trials addressing patient outcomes in triple negative breast cancer, small cell lung cancer, and advanced colon cancer therapies. In addition, we offered patients the opportunity to participate in a breakthrough clinical trial sponsored by a pioneering company that is developing a new annual multicancer detection blood test that may help to one day detect cancer earlier and at a lower cost than traditional screening methods. We have also planned to expand the number of national (NCI Sponsored) cancer care delivery research (CCDR) studies we support. CCDR studies are designed to improve clinical outcomes and patient well-being by intervening on patient, clinician, and organizational factors that influence care delivery. For example, we plan to expand infrastructure to support a study that will evaluate how the financial impacts of cancer care on individuals and families. Our clinical research team members attended local, regional, and national conferences that offered professional education and technical training. In addition, our program has implemented new strategies for enrolling diverse and traditionally underrepresented patient populations in research studies.



The majority of our research studies are supported by **funding from the National Cancer Institute and top pharmaceutical industry sponsors**. Furthermore, Northeast Georgia Medical Center (NGMC) is proud to be designated a Research Network Member of the GA CORE and the GA NCORP, Georgia's National Cancer Institute (NCI) Community Oncology Research Program.

As one of only 34 NCI national, community-based research programs, the GA NCORP research network provides Georgians in urban and rural areas access to state-of-the-art cancer prevention, screening, control, treatment and post-treatment trials.

Cancer Type Addressed by Clinical Trials



We are thrilled to continue to provide cancer care and research opportunities of the highest quality in our community, and **we look forward to the year ahead.**

# RADIATION ONCOLOGY ADVANCEMENTS



## Geoffrey Weidner, MD

Northeast Georgia Physicians Group Radiation Oncology  
Radiation Oncology Medical Director, NGMC

Radiation oncology at Northeast Georgia Health System (NGHS) has continued to progress in 2023. We offer high quality, advanced radiation techniques with a focus on individualized patient care.

The discipline of radiation oncology continues to trend toward offering more hypofractionated treatments and our department continues to expand the use of this technique for several treatment sites. Hypofractionation delivers fewer treatments at a higher dose per treatment usually to a more conformal volume which results in more convenience, less cost, and often reduced side effects for our cancer patients. In several disease sites there are specialized techniques that allow us to achieve the advantages of hypofractionation. Stereotactic techniques rotate the radiation beam around a single or small number of points providing a high dose to a small area with a much lower dose to surrounding tissue which enables the delivery of hypofractionated treatment. This modality is often used for meningiomas or cancers spread to the brain where it is termed stereotactic radiosurgery (SRS) and for prostate cancer and cancers that have started in or spread to the lung or other parts of the body where it is termed stereotactic body radiation therapy (SBRT). To expand the availability of this approach, a second linear accelerator treatment machine with additional stereotactic capabilities was installed in our Braselton location this year.

Our department has also offered the use of radiation therapy to treat benign conditions that can be life threatening although not cancerous. We have collaborated with Interventional Neuroradiology specialists at Northeast Georgia Medical Center (NGMC) in Gainesville to continue to treat vascular abnormalities such as arteriovenous malformations with SRS. We have also completed preparation to treat trigeminal neuralgia, a painful condition of the nerve that supplies sensation to the face which has been successfully treated with SRS.

Brachytherapy treatments involve placing a radioactive source in close proximity to the cancer to target a high dose of radiation to the cancer while sparing surrounding structures from significant radiation exposure.

Other radiation centers recognize our department's

expertise in brachytherapy and continue to refer their patients to NGMC for these specialized procedures, particularly for gynecologic cancers. We began treating prostate cancer with high dose rate brachytherapy in 2022 and expanded our volume of this procedure in 2023. This procedure involves placing catheters in the prostate in the operating room to be later attached to a machine that guides radioactive sources into the catheters in a specific pattern that gives a very precise and focused dose of radiation. The catheters are then removed prior to the patients return home the same day. Jack Griffeth, MD, and Brooke Leachman, MD, are currently performing this procedure for our department.

In the Department of Radiation Oncology at NGHS we are proud of the progress we have made toward providing cutting edge cancer treatment. **We will continue to grow with our patient population and advances in the oncology field.** We look forward to continuing to provide high quality radiation therapy to the Northeast Georgia community in the years ahead.



# LUNG CANCER SCREENING PROGRAM



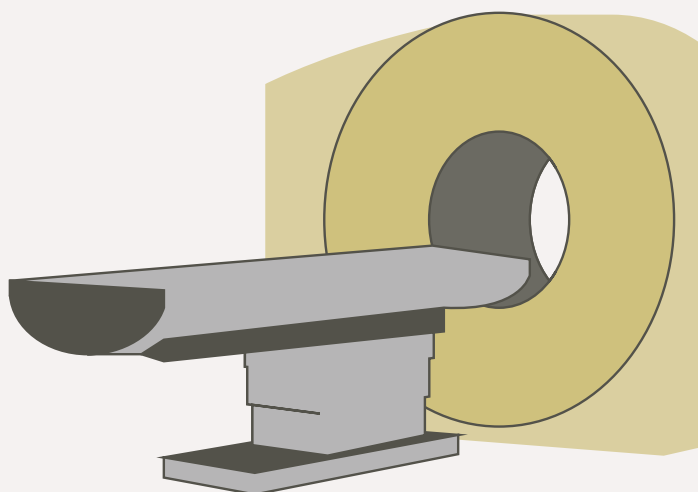
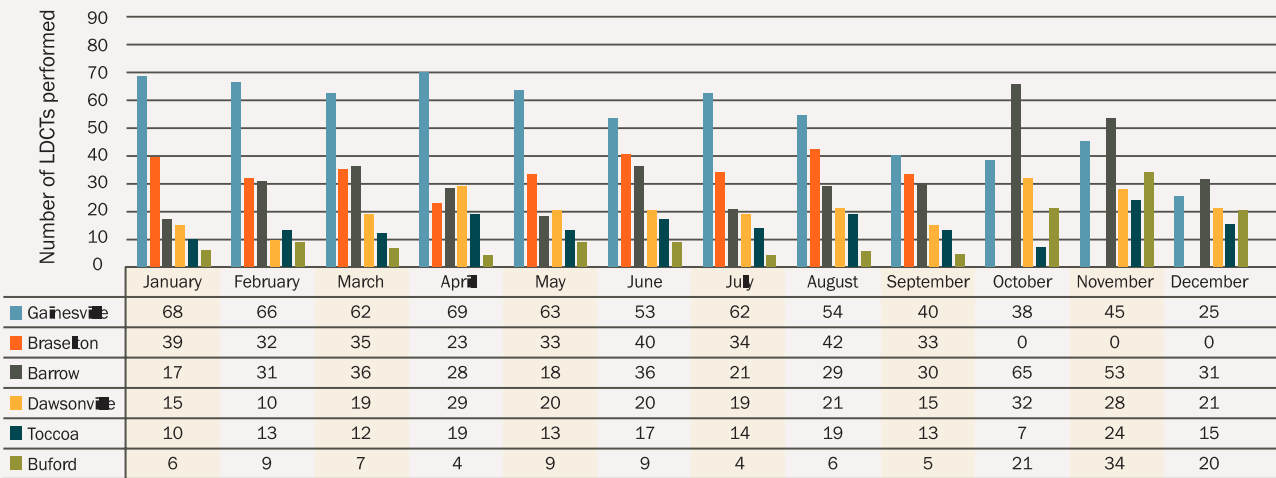
## Rami Arfoosh, MD

Pulmonary and Sleep Specialists of Northeast Georgia  
Chest Board Chair, NGMC

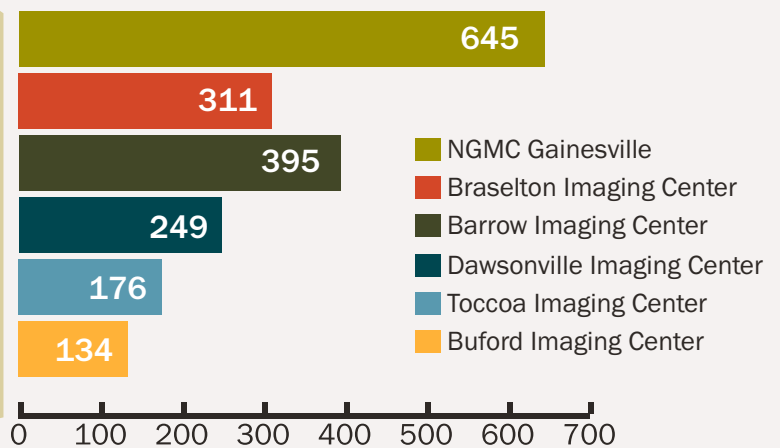
The lung cancer screening program at Northeast Georgia Medical Center (NGMC) continues to excel in early detection and treatment of lung cancer. In 2023, we have seen further growth in lung cancer screening volumes and improved outcomes through our participation in the American College of Radiology (ACR) National Lung Cancer Screening Registry.

This year, our lung screening volumes increased by 2% compared to 2022. We performed a total of 1,910 low-dose computed tomography (LDCT) scans across our imaging sites, up from 1,1880 scans last year.

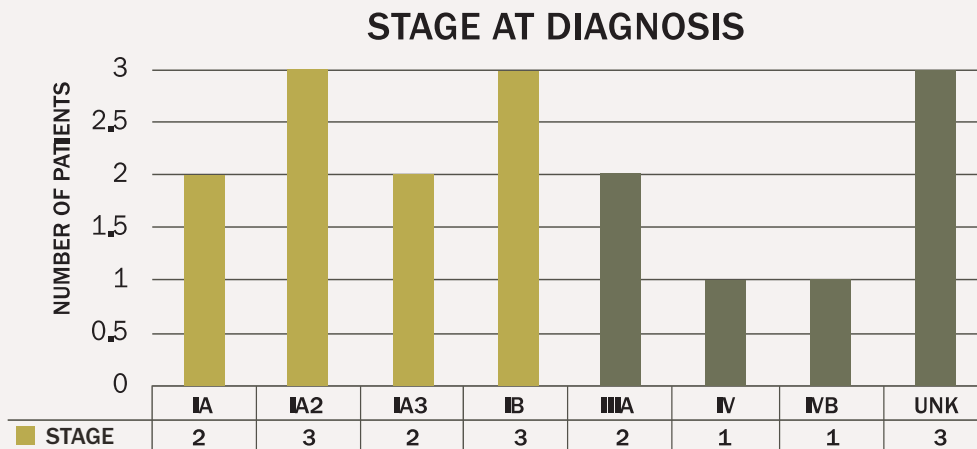
2023 NGMC LDCT by Imaging Location



LDCT scans performed at each site



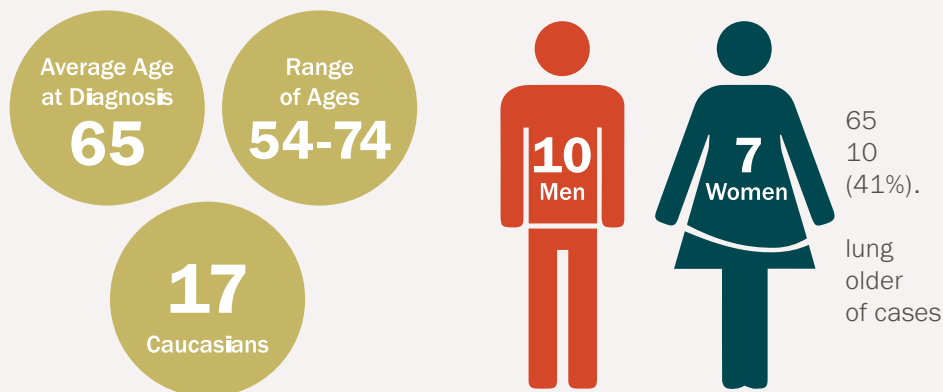
Through our lung screening program, we had a total of 17 positive screens that required additional diagnostic workup. Of those, we diagnosed 17 lung cancers, a slight increase compared to 15 cases last year.



This stage distribution shows our lung screening program is successfully detecting lung cancers at earlier stages when they are most treatable.

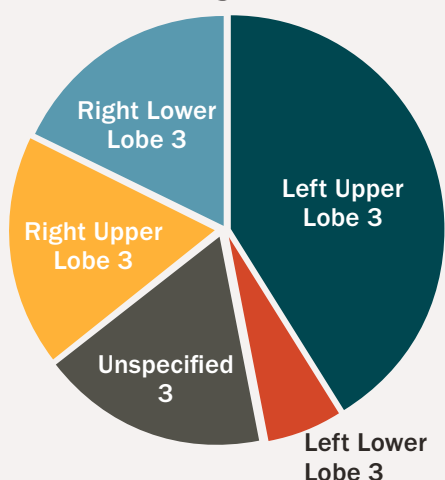
The average age at diagnosis was 65 years old. Gender breakdown was 10 male cases (59%) and 7 female cases (41%).

This aligns with national trends of cancer disproportionately affecting individuals and men. Racial demographics were 17 Caucasian patients (100%).

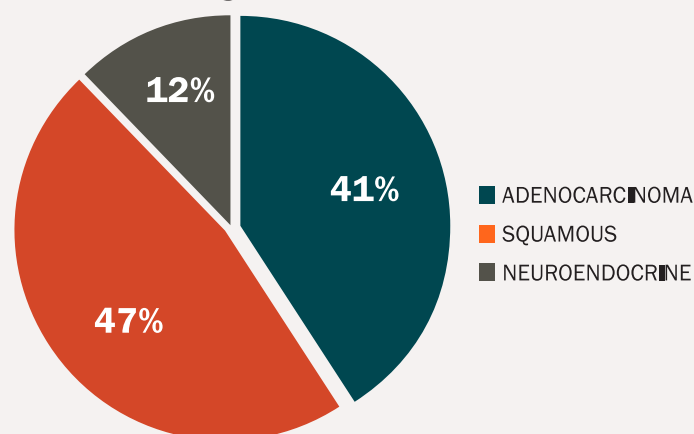


In summary, our lung cancer screening program continues to expand its reach and improve early detection of lung cancer in our community. While we have seen growth in our lung screening volumes overall, our cases diagnosed still disproportionately represent caucasian patients. Moving forward, we aim to increase awareness and utilization of our lung screening program among minority populations through expanded community outreach and education efforts. We aim to further grow volumes and diagnose cancers at the earliest stages through our involvement in the ACR lung screening registry. Detecting lung cancer early ultimately translates to better outcomes and survival for our patients.

**Location of Lung Cancers Diagnosed LDCT Program CY23**



**History of Lung Cancers Diagnosed LDCT Program CY23**



# LUNG CANCER

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## Ruben Ruiz Vega, MD, PGY-3

Internal Medicine Resident  
NGMC Graduate Medical Education

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer-related deaths worldwide and accounts for the highest mortality rates among both men and women. In the United States (US) alone, about 1 in 5 of all cancer deaths is attributed to lung cancer. The American Cancer Society estimated about 238,340 new cases of lung cancer and about 127,070 deaths from lung cancer in the US for 2023. Lung cancer primarily occurs in older individuals with the average age at time of diagnosis being 70 years old. Unfortunately, lung cancer is often diagnosed at advanced stages when treatment options are limited. Therefore, screening high risk individuals has the potential to allow early detection and to dramatically improve survival rates. The United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommends annual lung cancer screening with a low-dose computed tomography (LDCT) in adults aged 50 to 80 years who have a 20 pack-year smoking history and currently smoke or have quit smoking within the past 15 years.

Northeast Georgia Health System (NGHS) was selected as 1 of 13 organizations to receive a \$50,000 grant as part of the Takeda Oncology Improving Health Equity in Cancer; A community grant program to help narrow the gaps in lung screenings and lung cancer care support of the underserved, minority, rural, and uninsured residents of 10 Northeast Georgia counties during 2023. Objectives were set to maximize the utilization of the grant. Such goals included providing access to healthcare, screening/testing, and educational awareness.

### Access to Healthcare

To help reduce the gap in healthcare access, the Takeda Oncology grant helped support 70 lung cancer patients with financial assistance for transportation to biopsy, surgery, or medical appointments. Funds were allocated to provide genetic counseling appointments for 10 uninsured individuals with genetic variations. Finally, 20 patients and their caregivers were able to attend monthly lung cancer support groups.

### Screening/Testing

A portion of the grant was utilized to screen high risk individuals with the goal of providing early detection and to improve lung cancer survival rates. A total of 115 lung cancer screenings were performed on uninsured residents in Northeast Georgia. The grant also helped provide Next Generation Sequence (NGS) Testing co-pay assistance for 150 uninsured patients with a diagnosis of non-small cell lung cancer (NSCL). These individuals also received assistance completing their application and test request forms for NGS foundation funding programs.

### Educational Awareness

The final mission of the cancer grant program was to provide education awareness designed for healthcare providers and the community. Three community education events and two lung cancer survivorship activities were held with at risk groups to promote medical education regarding lung cancer symptoms, screening, and how to access care. Similarly, educational sessions were held with at least 10 rural providers to review lung cancer screening guidelines and their application to optimize lung cancer screenings. As a sponsoring Graduate Medical Education (GME) institution, an education session regarding Next Generation Sequence (NGS) testing was held with our internal medicine residents.

As an awardee of the Takeda Oncology Improving Health Equity in Cancer Grant Program, NGHS has been able to continue to advance its health mission to improve the health of our community in all we do. According to the American Lung Association's State of Lung Cancer report, the rate of new lung cancer cases in Georgia was 58%. This value was significantly higher than the national rate of 54.6%. Georgia ranks 32nd among all states when it comes to lung cancer screening and prevention. Work remains to help improve access to healthcare, providing screening/testing, and continuing to advance medical education with our healthcare providers and community. With grants like this, and future projects already at work, we take small steps improve the health of our patients so that are better off tomorrow than they are today.



# BEYOND ASK QUALITY IMPROVEMENT PROJECT



**Andria Caton, MSN, RN, OCN, CHPN**

Assistant Nurse Manager, Oncology Services, NGMC

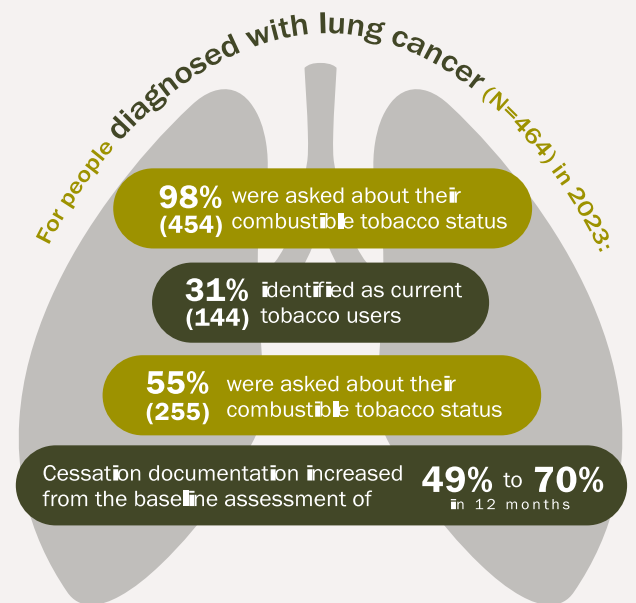
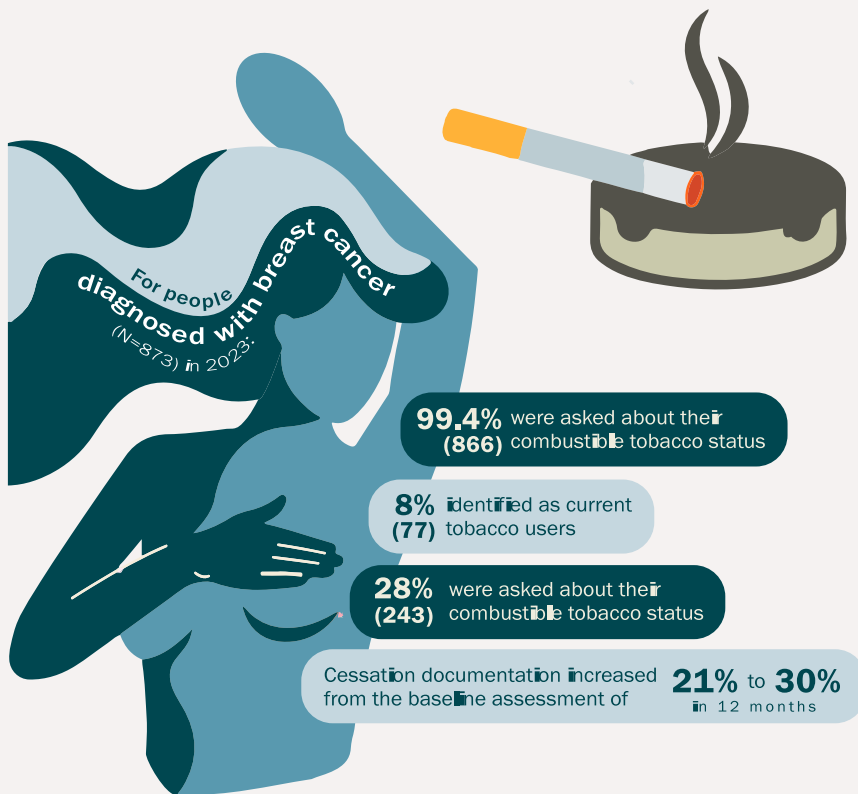
Building on the Just Ask Quality Improvement Project in 2022, Northeast Georgia Medical Center (NGMC) participated in the national Quality Improvement Project sponsored by American College of Surgeons Cancer Programs, Beyond Ask.

The aim of Beyond Ask project was to:

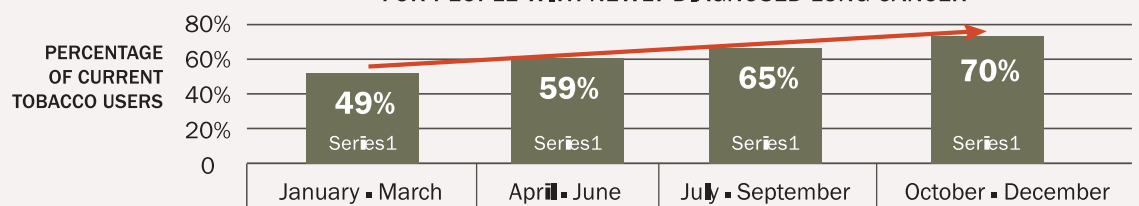
- Increase number of patients who are offered assistance for smoking cessation
- Show progress/ability to identify and then develop systems to support smoking cessation
- Increase number of patients with a documented smoking status assessment

Methods utilized in the quality assessment were chart review and PDSA. Throughout 2023, the tobacco history was assessed for every newly diagnosed person with breast and lung cancer. Like in the Just Ask Quality Improvement Project in 2022, NGMC providers and clinical staff continue to have high tobacco history ask rates in 2023.

In 2023, cessation documentation improved over baseline assessment in both patient populations with the greatest increase seen in people with lung cancer. Below are the outcomes of the project.



**2023 CESSATION INTERVENTION DOCUMENTATION FOR PEOPLE WITH NEWLY DIAGNOSED LUNG CANCER**



# CANCER PROGRAM GOAL - INCREASING PNEUMOCOCCAL VACCINATION RATES



**Steven Barker, MD, PGY2**  
Internal Medicine Resident  
NGMC Graduate Medical Education



**Andria Caton, MSN, RN, OCN, CHPN**  
Assistant Nurse Manager,  
Oncology Services, NGMC

In 2023, the Cancer Program Goal was focused on increasing pneumococcal vaccination rates for people diagnosed with lung cancer.

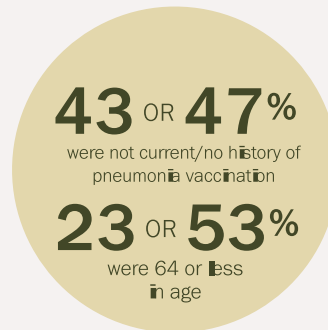
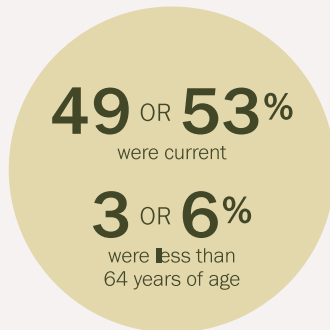
**NGMC  
2023 Cancer  
Program Goal:**

**METHOD  
USED**  
Plan, Do,  
Study, Act

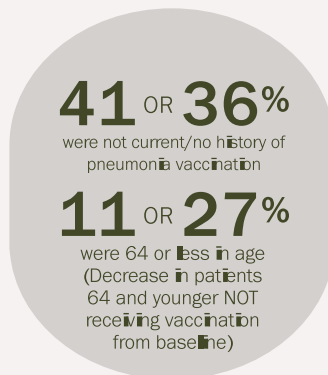
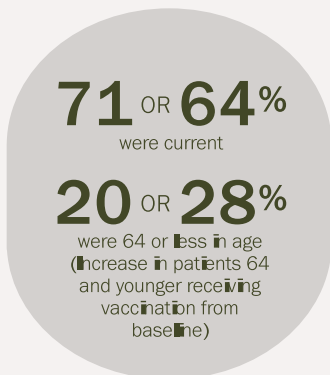
Increase the percentage of all newly diagnosed people with lung cancer at Northeast Georgia Medical Center (NGMC) receiving the pneumococcal vaccination prior to the start of cytotoxic treatment or radiation therapy by 25% over 12 months.

- **PLAN** – Baseline data - Provider, resident, and nurse knowledge assessment of pneumonia vaccination for people ages 18-64 with cancer
- **PLAN** - Baseline data – Chart review of newly diagnosed lung cancer patients from January – March 2023 (n=92) to assess compliance
- **DO** – April – June 2023 - Provided education guidelines to residents and oncology nurses in monthly staff meetings, education of oncology providers at tumor conferences and cancer committee meetings
- **DO** – Second data collection to assess interventions – Chart review of newly diagnosed lung cancer patients from July – September 2023 (n=112)

**STUDY**  
Baseline data



**STUDY**  
Final data



**ACT**

Disseminate findings to residents, oncology nurses, and oncology providers; Continue to provide scheduled focused pneumonia vaccination education to reinforce vaccination to reinforce vaccination for the ages of 18-64 prior to the start of cytotoxic treatment or radiation therapy.



# NUTRITION - A DIETITIAN'S ROLE IN CANCER CARE



**Chrissy Williams, RD**

Oncology Dietician, NGMC

When a patient is newly diagnosed with cancer, the dietitian often gets a call and is told that this patient would like to learn how to eat better and support a way of living that does not continue to “feed cancer.” This is one aspect of how the dietitian assists the oncology patient population. When it comes to oncology and nutrition there are many moving parts that are not always as straight forward as: “fuel properly and focus on these guidelines.”

“Nutrition Impact Symptoms” are symptoms that a patient might experience while undergoing surgery, chemotherapy, immunotherapy and/or radiation. Supporting patients impacted by these symptoms is one of the most abundant parts of the dietitian’s role. Poor nutrition status can not only delay treatment but stop treatment completely. Nutrition impact symptoms that can impact a person’s nutrition status throughout treatment include: ageusia, dysgeusia, dysphagia, nausea, constipation, diarrhea, mucositis, early satiety, pain with swallowing/ chewing, lack of appetite and many others. It is the role of the dietitian to not only guide the patient through those nutrition impact symptoms but to make sure they understand the spectrum of how nutrition can impact their treatment, life and recovery and assist them in figuring out the safest and best course to prevent and overcome those barriers.

In 2023 the Oncology Dietitian provided education and intervention to over 275 patients needing medical nutrition therapy as well as assisted 7 new esophagectomy patients with jejunostomy tube placements to optimize their nutrition status prior to surgery and treatment.



## Eating better

supports a  
a way of living  
**continue to**

a way  
**does not**  
“feed cancer.”

# ONCOLOGY NAVIGATION

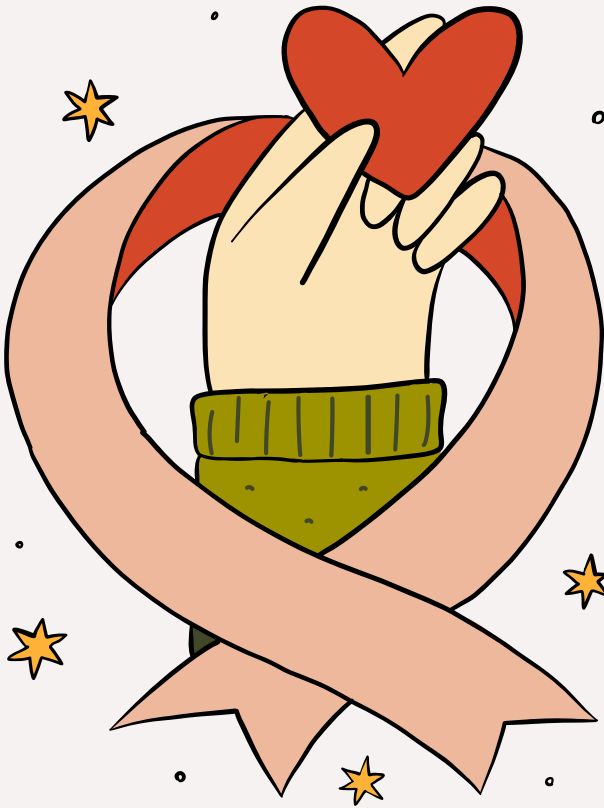
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**Alicia Harrison, RN**

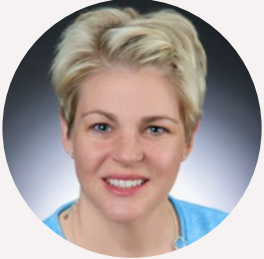
Navigation & Radiation Therapy Supervisor, NGMC

To be told you have cancer diagnosis can be a scary and overwhelming experience. The oncology navigation team strives to alleviate some of the anxiety cancer patients may feel at diagnosis and throughout treatment. Northeast Georgia Medical Center (NGMC) Oncology Program has six nurse oncology navigators and one resource navigator who assists the oncology patients. With the ever-changing landscape of oncology care, the oncology navigation team ensures patients and caregivers have the support they need. Oncology navigation assists patients and caregivers with coordination of care, addressing barriers to care, providing resources, and empowering them to actively participate in their care by ensuring they understand their diagnosis and treatment through education. In 2023, the oncology navigation team made over 3400 new patient contacts.



Everyone has felt the impact of the increased cost of living over the past year especially for essential items like food and gas. In 2023, the oncology navigation team was able to provide greater than 2400 patients with financial assistance by working with local and national foundations. Patients have expressed that transportation is one of their largest burdens. Working through the American Cancer Society, NGMC was able to receive a grant to assist patients with transportation to and from their oncology appointments. With this grant, NGMC was able to provide over 5,100 trips to oncology appointments ensuring patients were able to receive their life saving treatments in a timely manner.

# ONCOLOGY NURSING



**Kimberly Tyner-Meeks, RN, OCN**  
Outpatient Infusion Coordinator, NGMC

Oncology nurses love celebrations. Whether it's celebrating a life milestone with a patient—a birthday, a wedding, the birth of a grandchild, or celebrating a treatment milestone by ringing the bell, we love to recognize our patients. In 2023 the Oncology Services staff members had the privilege to celebrate our lung cancer patients by participating in the White Ribbon Project. The White Ribbon Project promotes awareness about lung cancer by changing public perception of the disease. Events were held to solicit our community to help trace, sand, paint, and sign wooden ribbons. One event was held outside the Gainesville Radiation Therapy department to make it easy for staff members to participate. The ribbons were presented to lung cancer patients in the Outpatient Infusion department, Radiation Therapy departments, community oncology practices, and at the Lung Cancer Support Group monthly meeting. We also had the opportunity to provide support to lung cancer patients in need through a generous grant from the Takeda Foundation in 2023. When the ribbons and gift cards were presented to the lung cancer patients, it was jokingly referred to as “The Prize Patrol.”



Another favorite way to celebrate our patients is at the annual Harvest of Hope event. 2023 was the comeback year after the Covid-19 pandemic. The Outpatient Infusion staff was present to greet all cancer survivors and their families, and the Oncology Navigators helped by handing out swag for the goodie bags. Staff members were present to encourage survivors to take advantage of the photo booth and dance after dinner. Survivors had the opportunity to trace ribbons at this event as well.



Picture #1 – Gainesville Outpatient Infusion nurses signing and preparing a lung cancer awareness ribbon to give to a patient.  
Picture #2 - Lung cancer support group members with Blake McCarrin from WJBB radio promoting lung cancer awareness in Barrow County.  
Picture #3 – Gainesville S4D Oncology nurses celebrating lung cancer awareness with the White Ribbon.

# ONCOLOGY REHABILITATION

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**Heather Wilsey, PT, DPT**

Outpatient Rehabilitation Supervisor

Early detection and progressive treatment options continue to contribute to increased cancer survival rates. Cancer survivors deserve not only to survive, but also to thrive. The medical management of cancer can result in sequela that changes the survivors' functional capabilities. The changes can be temporary, or at least somewhat reversible, with rehabilitation efforts. The reality is that most cancer survivors can benefit from a referral to a rehabilitation professional at some point in their cancer journey related to pain, swelling, mobility limitations, swallowing dysfunction, cognitive changes, and numerous other issues.

NGMC has rehabilitation professionals such as Physical Therapists (PT), Occupational Therapists (OT) and Speech Language Pathologists (SLP), throughout the continuum of care who have experience serving cancer survivors. In FY23, NGMC Rehabilitation Services provided therapy to all types of cancer survivors, in every setting of the organization, with focus on continuing growth and development in three outpatient areas: lymphedema therapy, head and neck cancer therapy, and pelvic floor therapy. Focus was also placed on community and physician education outreach efforts during FY23. This outreach included a community lymphedema presentation to cancer survivors (August 2023), a radiation oncology presentation to providers (September 2023) and a gynecology oncology presentation to providers (September 2023) to spread the word that help is available to cancer survivors if needed from the NGMC Rehabilitation Department.

Lymphedema affects approximately 1 in 5 patients treated for breast cancer who have undergone axillary lymph node dissection and can have a significant negative impact on patients' quality of life after breast cancer treatment. NGMC has Certified Lymphedema Therapists (CLTs) in both the inpatient and outpatient settings (with the outpatient setting adding an additional provider in FY23). The CLTs worked with a committee to develop and implement a standardized evaluation protocol to ensure that breast cancer survivors who are at high risk for lymphedema receive education and evidence-based care even prior to the emergence of clinical signs of lymphedema. During FY23 outpatient PT, CLTs gained further specialization into lymphedema affecting not only the breasts and upper extremities, but also head and neck, lower extremity, and genital regions as well. NGMC is proud to have one of the PT, CLTs also serve as an official Certified Medical Interpreter, allowing the provider to be able to communicate effectively with Spanish speaking patients regarding lymphedema education and treatment planning. Physical therapy interventions for cancer-related lymphedema education, surveillance, and treatment have increased 30% during FY23.

NGMC now has three PORi Certified Oncology Rehabilitation Therapists (1 PT and 2 SLPs) who offer advanced clinical care to head and neck cancer survivors. While the PT may be focusing on lymphedema and activities of daily living, the SLPs may be focused on swallowing function. Often, however, it is a collaborative effort. Speech therapy interventions for cancer survivors have increased 30% during FY23 including interventions such as:

- treatments to address the impact of surgical changes including laryngectomies, radical neck dissections, glossectomies, etc. and impact on swallowing/speaking functions
- swallowing imaging to establish safe diet levels and provide compensatory swallowing strategies
- treatment of dysphagia related to radiation fibrosis, lymphedema, and trismus
- manual lymphatic drainage for lymphedema to reduce impact on swallowing skills

NGMC now has access to three outpatient, pelvic floor physical therapists with advanced training who can offer rehabilitation services for individuals who have undergone medical treatments for breast, prostate, gynecological, and colorectal cancers. Pelvic floor physical therapy works on addressing and minimizing urinary incontinence, bowel dysfunction, sexual function/dysfunction, pain, cancer-related fatigue, and radiation changes to pelvic floor tissues. Cancer survivors referred for outpatient, pelvic floor physical therapy increased 20% in FY23.

Oncology rehabilitation is a necessary component to maximize quality of life for many cancer survivors, and NGMC is proud to continue growing and developing therapy providers in the areas described above.



Northeast Georgia Medical Center