

Optimism resonates

During her first meeting with Joan Schiller, M.D., professor and chief of UT Southwestern's Division of Hematology/Oncology and deputy director of the Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center, newpatient Anita Harkey, 64, had some words of encouragement for the doctor.

Anita recalls, "When we met and I first told her, 'I'm going to be one of your patients who survives for years and years! Dr. Schiller's first response was *silence*; Harkey says, 'I guess she wasn't sure what to say. So I told her, 'This is where you say, 'Yes, you are!'" And sure enough, she said, 'Yes, you are!' I have been coaching her in resonating to my optimism."

In 2009, Anita was diagnosed with stage IV non-small cell lung cancer. After a six-month course of chemotherapy and "maintenance" chemo treatment through October of 2010, a growing tumor was revealed. Ever the optimist, Anita says, "I am currently between treatments and considering trials."

Anita, who received a Master's degree in Psychology from Southern Methodist University, counseled troubled adolescents for 11 years, then spent four years in commercial real estate. More recently, she has served as a hospice volunteer with the Visiting Nurses Association for the past decade and was responsible for initiating and developing the first public library in Saint Jo, a Chisholm Trail town where James grew up and the couple ranches. "His great-grandfather homesteaded the land in the 1880s and we now run cattle there," Anita says.

"Complete confidence ..."

Anita's own trail to the Simmons Cancer Center initially took a few winding turns. "I started by seeing a general oncologist in late June of 2009 at [another Dallas hospital], then went to MD Anderson (in Houston) for a second opinion. I was treated through MD Anderson until November of 2009, when they referred me to Dr. Schiller," Anita says. "[My physician] at MD Anderson said I could not do better than Dr. Schiller, that she is considered to be among the top five lung cancer researchers in the country."

The research conducted at Simmons Cancer Center is an integral component to Anita's treatment, which she recognizes and appreciates. "Because my oncologist is a top researcher in the field of lung cancer," Anita says, "I am assured of having access to the very latest knowledge relevant to my treatment."

Dr. Schiller agrees, adding, "It's through research that we find better treatments, based on the foundation of what we're doing currently. Sometimes treatment options are relatively new and thus are not well-known, so staying current in the research of the field can really be important."

In addition to her expertise in the field, Dr. Schiller impressed Anita with her compassionate bedside manner. Over time, Anita recalls, "I experienced her warmth and genuine concern for me. I have complete confidence that she is rigorously honest with me."

Anita extended similar praise to Dr. Schiller's entire support team, especially nurse Devrie Hahm and nurse practitioner Sharon Woodruff.

Multiple resources available

The benefits of the Simmons Cancer Center's team approach to patient care have been obvious to Anita and much appreciated. Anita says, "When I first came to Simmons, I was introduced to a social worker, a nutritionist, and a psychologist. Each was available to me as needed. For instance, I asked the social worker about local cancer retreats and she identified one for me that proved to be very comforting and sustaining."

The number of resources expands as needed. "I am thrilled that there is now a palliative care oncologist on the team, Dr. Jessica Masterson," Anita says, adding, "She spent over an hour with me in our first meeting and has been similarly generous with her time and interest since then. She was able to prescribe a pain medication which is effective without being debilitating. The presence of Dr. Masterson on the team is an enormous advantage to patients."

Such a comprehensive approach to patient care helps set Simmons Cancer Center apart from its peers. Dr. Schiller says, “Patients have a lot of needs and frequently health care providers don’t have the skill sets or expertise to address all of them. That’s where the team approach plays so well. If patients have a lot of needs, it’s even more important that we’re there to help them.”

In fact, adds Dr. Schiller, “Just like it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to care for a cancer patient. We know our patients as a team and they know us as a team. The team approach enables and facilitates more and better communication with the patient, which can help us solve problems.”

Anita’s initial optimism continues, and it has spread. Harkening back to that first “Yes you are!” conversation with Anita, Dr. Schiller says, “We strive for *realistic optimism*.” The world-class research and team approach to patient care at Simmons Cancer Care gives patients and doctors reason to believe.