Community Oncology Research Award Winners Use Awards to Enhance Quality of Their Practices

Three community oncology practices received \$30,000 ASCO Community Oncology Research Awards (CORAs) from the ASCO Cancer Foundation this year. CORAs are designed to support clinical researchers at the community level to enhance their research programs. Read more about the winners below.

The Maine Center for Cancer Medicine (MCCM), the largest oncology practice in Maine, has four office locations, 16 physicians, five nurse practitioners, and a very active research program comprising 11 team members.

Dr Ivette Emery is the senior scientist at MCCM. “Considering that 15 practices were nominated and only three recipients selected, we felt extremely honored to receive this award,” Emery says. Dr Daniel Hayes, one of the practice’s founding physicians and the current president of MCCM, agrees. “We are very honored and feel that the grant will help us to link activities and build efficiencies,” he says. “It is a fabulous opportunity that we’re taking advantage of.” The grant allows the research team to focus on physician-centered and patient-centered activities.

Activities for patients are designed to better integrate clinical trials into the practice culture. “We want to manage patients’ expectations from the beginning by familiarizing them with clinical trials and the fact that, at some point, they may be approached about participating in one,” Emery says. One such effort was the implementation of screen saver software for the exam rooms that runs practice-related news, including the names and descriptions of current clinical trials. This exposes patients to clinical trials from the start and gives them an opportunity, if interested, to ask their physicians about them. The practice also is developing a patient education class that provides general information designed to improve patients’ understanding of the mechanics of clinical trials.

On the physician side, physicians now have ready access to what clinical trials are available and which of their patients might be eligible for those trials through modification of the “Intent-to-Treat” tab in their electronic medical records software. When the physician clicks on the tab, he can quickly see what clinical trials are open and may be appropriate for those patients who are in need of a new treatment approach.

Although the practice is linked to 60 clinical trials, it also has a translational research program that supports practice physicians who want to study a clinical issue. The grant will support the practice in expanding that program. Currently,

three members of the practice are working on their own studies.

Hayes also points to this award as a mark of the practice’s leadership role, saying that it demonstrates its excellence and high-quality care. “Just receiving the award raises awareness of our practice among physicians, payers, and patients,” he says. “It also builds interest in clinical trials.”

Northern New Jersey Cancer Associates is a faculty practice-based at the John Theuerer Cancer Center at Hackensack Medical Center. Dr Andrew L. Pecora, a faculty oncologist and chairman of the Cancer Center medical staff, says that he and his colleagues are “pleased to receive the award and happy with what it will enable them to do.” Their program has been dedicated to translating science into medical procedures and discoveries since 1989, when Pecora joined the staff. “We were a funded CCOP center for 22 consecutive years,” Pecora says. “Now we are moving to become a National Cancer Institute-designated cancer center.”

The research division consolidates all of the basic science research and clinical trials that are conducted at the Cancer Center, which has more than 75 clinical trials currently under investigation. These focus on evaluating the safety and effectiveness of new medications, treatment methods, surgical techniques, medical and surgical technology, imaging studies, protocols for treatments, and medical devices in human volunteers. They have clinical trials for almost every type of cancer and many serious blood disorders and immune deficiencies. Pecora says that 68% of eligible patients accrued to clinical trials this year, which is double the accrual rate of the most competitive centers.

The major impact of the award, Pecora says, is that the staff’s research efforts were recognized by an organization as prestigious as ASCO. “It was their hard work that got us this recognition, and that makes them feel good.”

Oncology Care Consultants is located in Frederick, Maryland. Dr P. Gregory Rausch, who founded the practice in 1979, says that he and his colleagues “were humbled and deeply honored by the grant.” They “thank the Maryland and District of Columbia Society of Clinical Oncology who nominated them and the ASCO Foundation for this great honor.” The practice also received the Community Practice Clinical Trials Award in 2003, the first year it was given.

Dr Rausch and his two partners plan to use the funding to increase minority participation in its clinical trials. “We offer our patients up to 40 active trials from the NSABP, ECOG,

The Community Oncology Research Award winners for 2009 are (left to right) Brian O'Connor, MD, and P. Gregory Rausch, MD, FACP, Oncology Care Consultants, Frederick, MD; Andrew L. Pecora, MD, Northern New Jersey Cancer Associates, Hackensack, NJ; and Daniel Hayes, MD, and Ivette Emery, PhD, Maine Center for Cancer Medicine & Blood Disorders, Scarborough, ME.

CTSU, and pharmaceutical-sponsored studies and on average, 16% of all new patients are enrolled onto clinical studies. However, our minority participation is only 6%, whereas our minority population in this area is 13%. We would like to correct this inequity.” Rausch says. To accomplish this, the office will seek the assistance of the diversity council at the local hospital, take a multidisciplinary approach to recruitment, reach out to local churches, and host community educational programs.

Oncology Care Consultants will qualify their research coordinator and data managers by using some of the funds to

support them in becoming certified. Finally, they will attempt to develop an integrated software program to better manage data, protocol submission requirements, and adverse event reporting.

All of these efforts are aimed at “simplifying data management, increasing trial accrual rates, and maximizing efficiency on all fronts.” Rausch says.

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