Winship Phase I Unit Marks 5th Anniversary

By R. Donald Harvey, PharmD

Patients.
Clinical trials.
We cannot have one without the other.
The Phase I Clinical Trials Unit at Winship Cancer Institute of Emory University opened in 2009, a time when a significant expansion of clinical trial efforts was underway to support the National Cancer Institute cancer center designation. Over this rapid five-year period, a truly collaborative culture has led to a cutting-edge, early drug development program at a nationally recognized, top 25 cancer center.

None of this has been possible without patients putting their trust in our physicians, nurses, scientists, and many others, to deliver optimal care while asking critical questions about novel drugs and approaches. When I think about the impact of our Phase I unit on patients and their families, I recall a recent conversation with a seasoned oncologist here at Emory. He said, “Donald, if I saw anyone in the chairs here at a store, I wouldn’t know they had cancer.” A simple statement, but one that conveys a number of key messages about how our phase I trials have evolved over five years. Drugs we now have at hand, as a whole, are much safer and better tolerated than conventional chemotherapy. We also have access to more agents with much better activity against cancer, leading to more treatment options.

With improved treatment comes a sense of satisfaction. However, we cannot over-emphasize the critical effect patients have on us as health care providers, researchers, and human beings. As a clinician-researcher, the greatest motivating factor I have is seeing patients do well on trials and coming to visits to talk about trips, family gatherings, important personal events, and the role that treatment on a trial had in helping them live their lives.

For this, we say thank you to our patients and their families for their trust and the courage they show on a daily basis. You keep up your fight, and we will keep up ours.
A cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming. In fact, many patients have told me that cancer can easily define your life with on-going treatment lasting months and even years. Many patients stop working, limit their social interactions and even change roles within their household as a way to focus on completing treatment. You might think that once chemotherapy, radiation and surgery are over a patient would celebrate and move on, but that’s not always the case. Many patients feel lost and can find themselves asking what now? The intense focus on treatment often overshadows the future.

Here are five tips to help you cope after your treatment is finished:

1. **Consider attending a local support group.** They are a great way to connect with others who have a similar diagnosis and have completed treatment. Support groups are a safe place to discuss the feelings that go along with being done with treatment and handling post treatment life.

2. **Reach out to a social worker or counselor.** They are often available to provide individual counseling. This is helpful in allowing you an opportunity to identify your strengths and appropriate ways to move forward now that you’re better.

3. **Think of what helped you cope before treatment.** Make a list of things that made you feel better when you were having a difficult time before you were diagnosed or treated. Some of those same healthy techniques such as exercise, yoga, or talking to a friend could be useful post treatment.

4. **Don’t rush yourself.** Be realistic about your expectations of how you should feel after treatment. Be sure to ask your medical team how you should feel both physically and emotionally post treatment. Remember, you have been through a lot, and it will take time for you to fully recover. Putting additional stress and pressure on yourself to “feel better” because you are finished with treatment can only make this more difficult.

5. **Remind yourself you are a survivor!** You have survived your diagnosis and treatment. Positive self-talk is beneficial in reducing stress and decreasing depressive symptoms.

More than 14 million Americans are cancer survivors. No matter what the type or stage of the disease, reaching out for additional support and assistance is just as important after treatment as it is during treatment.