

First to earn NCCN membership since 2005

Elite Membership Could Help Cancer Center Shape Care

By Tyler Smith

The University of Colorado Cancer Center this month joined an elite group of academic medical institutions dedicated to establishing standards for high-quality cancer care.

The National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN), headquartered in suburban Philadelphia, elected the Cancer Center as a member at its annual conference in Hollywood, Fla. The Cancer Center announced the news in a press release March 20.



Membership in NCCN gives the Cancer Center an opportunity to nominate faculty for key multidisciplinary panels that review diagnosis and treatment of various cancers, Cancer Center Director Dan Theodore says.

The NCCN, which now numbers 23 members, was formed in 1995 to review the state of cancer care in the United States and determine the highest standards care based on the best scientific evidence, said Mark Kochevar, the Cancer Center's top administrator. Today, he added, the NCCN includes 47 multidisciplinary panels, each one staffed by 25 to 30 medical experts who volunteer their time to review current treatments and diagnoses for dozens of cancers and make recommendations for improving the safety, quality and efficiency of care.

The Cancer Center will nominate faculty to some of the NCCN panels, said Director Dan Theodore, MD, PhD. Final decisions haven't been made, but he anticipated nominations to several panels, including bladder and lung cancer, melanoma and survivorship. The positions are not honorary, he added.

"Those who serve on these panels are expected to contribute service to the profession," Theodore said.

Guiding light. In addition, the NCCN has 58 guidelines for treatment, detection, prevention and risk reduction of various types of cancer, as well as recommendations for supportive and age-related care. Increasingly, the guidelines play an important role in making insurance coverage and health care policy decisions and evaluating the quality of care hospitals provide, Kochevar said.

"The NCCN election makes the Cancer Center a player in determining standards of care," he said. "We're recognized as a leader in quality and outcomes."



Cancer Center administrator Mark Kochevar helped build the case for NCCN membership.

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Theodorescu said the NCCN emphasis on developing standards of care meshes with the Cancer Center's goal of establishing uniform "clinical guidelines" for cancer patients at hospitals in the University of Colorado Health (UCHealth) system, including University of Colorado Hospital, Memorial Hospital and Poudre Valley Hospital.



In joining NCCN, the Cancer Center is among some of the top academic medical centers in the U.S.

The idea is that clinical management of a patient with, say, prostate cancer should be the same at Poudre Valley as it is at UCH. The NCCN guidelines provide national, evidence-based direction for deciding what the standards will be, Theodorescu said.

"Improving these guidelines also makes care better for cancer patients nationally. We are eager to contribute in this way," he added.

Knocking on the door. Kochevar said the creation of UCHealth in January 2012 was an integral part of the Cancer Center's case for election to the NCCN, but until recently, the door wasn't open. Membership had been closed since 2005, he said.

After Theodorescu arrived in July 2010, he approached the NCCN to re-inquire about membership and prepared some information describing the center's geographical reach, clinical outcomes, patient population, faculty members, and so on. But at that time, there was no process for considering new members, Kochevar said.

In 2012, however, the NCCN brought in a new CEO — a physician — and re-evaluated its strategic plan, Kochevar said. Suddenly, the organization reopened the door to those who could meet stringent guidelines. In the fall of 2012, the NCCN approached the Cancer Center to ask if it was still interested in membership.

Making the case. With that, Kochevar and others began compiling a much more detailed packet of information. They bolstered the case for membership with new developments since 2010, including implementation of the Epic electronic medical record; the formation of UCHealth, which vastly expanded the Cancer Center's service area; University HealthSystem Consortium quality awards earned by UCH and Poudre Valley Health System's Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award; and various construction projects on the Anschutz Medical Campus, including expansion of the Cancer Pavilion, a new Emergency Department, and a new inpatient tower.

The Cancer Center also noted its planned adoption of a comprehensive clinical trials management system — another key to developing standards for managing patient care — and its clinical expertise in a variety of cancer treatment programs with international reach, Kochevar said.

After supplying additional information in January 2013 that affirmed the institution's financial strength, the Cancer Center waited for various NCCN committees to review the entire package, he recounted. On March 15, Executive Director of Oncology Services Tom Purcell, MD, MBA, made a presentation to the NCCN board of directors at the annual conference in Florida. Richard Schulick, MD, chairman of the CU Department of Surgery, and Clayton Smith, MD, director of the Bone Marrow Transplant Program, were also on hand to provide support and evidence of the strength of the center's leadership.

After a question-and-answer session, the board welcomed the Cancer Center for membership, Kochevar said. "They were very complimentary of the information and what it showed," he noted.

The election burnishes the Cancer Center's reputation, but it is far more than a public relations coup, Kochevar added.

"This isn't joining a country club," he said. "We're among the nation's eminent cancer centers that volunteer hours, make a commitment and work toward creating the guidelines for diagnosing and treating cancer in the U.S. and internationally."