

To Your Health: World Cancer Day

February 3, 2023



Each February 4, World Cancer Day is held as a global uniting initiative led by the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC).

“By raising worldwide awareness, improving education and catalysing personal, collective and government action, we are all working together to reimagine a world where millions of preventable cancer deaths are saved and access to life-saving cancer treatment and care is equitable for all - no matter who you are or where you live,” the UICC states on its website.

While cancer is devastating, there is hope for a cure.

For insight into the latest cancer research, The Tillamook Headlight Herald reached out to Dr. Flavio Rocha, the Physician-in-Chief at the Oregon Health & Sciences University (OHSU) Knight Cancer Institute in Portland.

The TriPLICATE: What do you see on the horizon in regard to cancer research? Is it positive?

Dr. Flavio Rocha: Cancer is not new. It has been with us since ancient times. It is part of our cellular makeup. Our cells have to divide and so the way cancer occurs is that there is a defect in that division process.

It is difficult to say how long it will be with us but what is encouraging is that we have made significant progress as we learn more about the genetics, through profiling, as our drug discovery has improved, as our surgical techniques have improved and as our radiation technology has improved.

According to the American Cancer Society information released Jan. 13, the cancer mortality rate dropped by 33% since 1991, so I find that extremely encouraging. It just validates all the work that our cancer community has done, from cancer screening and prevention efforts to providers who take care of cancer patients, advocates who help us with patients so it has really been a community wide effort.

We will probably have about 2 million cancer diagnoses in the coming year, resulting in about 600,000 deaths, so we are not there yet.

The Triplicate: What do we look for? How do people know that they might be developing cancer?

Rocha: Typically, by the time that there are symptoms for some cancers, the ability for a cure may be rapidly closing. Things that we look for are onset of pain and blood in the stool. We try to catch this early through screening with mammograms, a colonoscopy, and prostate specific antigen (PSA) tests. Not all cancers can be screened. It puts us back a little bit in treatment.

The Triplicate: What is your recommendation to family members when they learn a member in their family has been diagnosed with cancer? What is the best approach to support those loved ones?

Rocha: This is where we get a lot of help from our patient advocates and there are lots of philanthropical organizations that are assisting, so sometimes it's not all about the treatment, it is about the support. So, we rely heavily on our system of life care, so our colleagues help us with that management and we determine what the goals are of our patients.

If families have a history of cancer, this is where screening can make a difference, so we do encourage genetic testing in order to drill down what is the potential and how will that effect other family members. Pre-testing is not for everybody and it comes with consequences. A medical advisor can help guide you through the process and help explain all that data. Our technology has evolved so rapidly, there are many things that we can do.

We don't just rely on chemotherapy. There are now drugs that stimulate the body's own defense to treat cancer and this has been an unbelievable advancement. There have also been advancements in cervical cancer treatment. These are things that can be done to prevent cancer in folks that don't have cancer.

As technology improves, we are also seeing new ways to detect cancer risks through blood draws. We do the work up and perhaps catch the cancer at an early stage and cure it.

I am absolutely encouraged and positive and this is what keeps us going. We are making progress. We'd like to be moving at a more rapid pace but as new technology is being developed, we keep marching on.

About the OHSU Knight Cancer Institute

The Knight Cancer Institute at Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) became an NCI-Designated Cancer Center in 1997 and was awarded comprehensive cancer center status in 2017. The Knight Cancer Institute is the only NCI-Designated Comprehensive Cancer Center between Sacramento and Seattle.

With its mission to end cancer as we know it, the institute is building on its groundbreaking expertise in targeted therapy to substantially improve outcomes for patients with advanced cancer and to enhance the ability to detect cancer at its earliest stages. From laboratory science to clinical trials of new treatments, to studying populations at risk, the institute's scientists are advancing the understanding of the root causes of cancer and finding ways to improve detection, diagnosis, treatment, and prevention.

For more information, contact the OHSU Knight Institute at 503-494-1617.