Patient navigator ‘a helping hand and listening ear’ for breast cancer patients

SA’s first breast patient navigator guides patients through treatment journey

Tuesday, 2 May 2017, A breast cancer diagnosis is a life-changing experience and it is common for individuals to feel overwhelmed at the journey that lies ahead of them. Supporting and assisting patients every step of the way and guiding them through their individual treatment process therefore form a meaningful part of the comprehensive and multidisciplinary service offered at the Netcare Milpark Breast Care Centre of Excellence.

“As far as I am aware, the Netcare Milpark Breast Care Centre of Excellence is the only centre that has a fully qualified nurse navigator,” says patient navigator Krupa Parekh-Padia, who recently completed her Breast Patient Navigator Certification Examination in the United States with flying colours, earning her CN-BN credentials.

“It is a first for South Africa; having a navigation team under myself trained in looking after all aspects of a patient’s care, from pre-diagnosis [radiology navigation] through treatment to survivorship,” says the 27-year-old, who recently returned to South Africa. Parekh-Padia was born in South Africa but grew up and studied in Southern California.”

“Since this is an emerging discipline, I often have to explain my role, which is essentially to stand by patients as their advocate, and help them to navigate through the various medical disciplines and healthcare providers during the treatment process. This prevents the patient from expending unnecessary energy that could be better focused on getting well again,” Parekh-Padia explains.

“I track the patient from diagnosis through treatment to recovery, ensuring a smooth transition from one phase of treatment to the next, serving as the point of communication between the patient and the various medical professionals who play a role in their treatment.”

The Netcare Milpark Breast Care Centre of Excellence, established by renowned specialist surgeon and breast disease specialist, Professor Carol-Ann Benn, in association with Netcare, has recently become the only such centre in Africa to receive a three-year, full accreditation by the National Accreditation Program for Breast Centers (NAPBC), administered by the American College of Surgeons.

The centre follows a comprehensive approach to the management of breast conditions and diseases. The multidisciplinary teams of healthcare professionals at the centre are involved in the diagnosis, clinical assessment, counselling, treatment including breast reconstruction, and patient support. The centre is, furthermore, highly focused on community initiatives including awareness, education, and access to care for patients who do not have comprehensive medical insurance.

Parekh-Padia says that her role as a member of the multidisciplinary team is to help facilitate communication between the various medical disciplines on each case, as well as communication between healthcare providers and the patient.
“This helps to ensure that the different aspects of a patient’s care are not dealt with in silos. Rather, the patient benefits from the most appropriate treatment assessed holistically. I also follow up to ensure patients are adhering to treatment and keeping their appointments with their respective specialists,” she explains.

Parekh-Padia holds a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from California State University, Los Angeles. She specialised in surgical oncology through the University of Southern California’s Keck Medical Centre and moved back to South Africa in January 2016.

“The first step I take after patients are diagnosed is to meet with them and discuss how they are coping with their diagnosis. There are many aspects of counselling involved in patient navigation. I often draw from the first meeting to try to find the best ‘fit’ between the patient and the oncologist to whom we refer them. I feel when we send the patient to the doctor best suited for their treatment and personality, they are more likely to comply with treatment. It is important to note that not all patients need the services of a patient navigator, but we provide assistance to those who require it and feel they will benefit from this relationship,” she adds.

“The navigator provides additional backup and support to doctors involved in the patient’s treatment. Not only am I a point of contact to keep the patient and the multidisciplinary team in touch, but I am also able to counsel patients through some of the surgical and oncological aspects of their care. I explain the various treatments, talk the patient through the steps, and discuss possible side effects and how these can be mitigated. I also try to identify any possible barriers to treatment and recovery so that these can be resolved.

“With my training and experience as an oncology registered nurse, I am often able to set a patient’s mind at rest. For example, I regularly meet with patients before they start chemotherapy, so I can help them work through any fears and anxieties. I will answer questions they have with regards to their pathology report, lifestyle changes, and how to deal with obstacles they may encounter. Once this rapport is established, patients know they can always rely on me for assistance throughout their journey.”

Parekh-Padia believes that her role helps patients to feel a sense of solidarity and benefit from supportive care through their treatment. “The best thing I can do for the patient is reassure them that they are not alone in this process and that we are here to support them in any way possible.”

She says that cancer survivors she has previously assisted often visit or phone the Netcare Milpark Breast Care Centre of Excellence to keep her informed of their progress. “Many of them are keen to share their stories with other patients, and I have encouraged some of our ex-patients to consider becoming patient navigators themselves, as they are extremely well placed to assist others, either on a voluntary basis or through formal training,” Parekh-Padia adds.

“Ultimately, the hands-on care that the patient navigator provides assists in eliminating much of the stress and hassle for the patient. I make it my personal mission to simplify their journey and make it as manageable as possible for them. In a nutshell, I try to be a helping hand and a listening ear,” she concludes.
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