

MaryAnn Fredrick is grateful to have had access to clinical trials close to her central Nebraska home. Here, she meets with medical oncologist Mehmet Copur, M.D., at Grand Island's Saint Francis Cancer Treatment Center.



MEDICAL TREATMENT CLOSE TO HOME

by Karen Burbach

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MaryAnn Fredrick was alone at work when the phone rang at 3 p.m. It was her doctor.

As executive director of the St. Paul (Neb.) Chamber of Commerce, she had been typing board meeting minutes on that bitterly cold Wednesday in February.

Suddenly, she found herself overwhelmed by medical lingo about treatments, side effects and prognosis for a rare type of invasive breast cancer. “I was scared to death.”

She shared the news with her two grown daughters, worried about how treatments would disrupt her work and life and sought second and third opinions in search of the best care.

She found it just 25 miles away at Grand Island’s Saint Francis Cancer Treatment Center.

Through a first-of-its-kind program, the UNMC Eppley Cancer Center works with hospitals across Nebraska, including Saint Francis, to bring clinical trials to patients in their own communities. Clinical trials are studies involving patients in whom doctors test the safety and efficacy of a drug or other treatment measure.

“Clinical trials provide the best oncology care available,” said Fredrick’s medical oncologist, Mehmet Copur, M.D., who oversees her care at Saint Francis. “Through the partnership, my patients have the opportunity to receive comprehensive cancer care in a

central Nebraska rural setting, but the quality of care is equivalent, or at times better, in my mind, than what they could receive in a tertiary cancer setting in any big city.”

Fredrick, 45, could have gone to a larger city, but realized “it made the most sense to be close to home. They were caring and compassionate — I didn’t feel lost in the shuffle.”

“These agreements allow cancer patients across Nebraska to have access to clinical trials available at UNMC,” said Kenneth Cowan, M.D., Ph.D., director of the UNMC Eppley Cancer Center. “We want to provide the best cancer diagnosis, treatment and prevention to every patient in the state.”

A native of Ankara, Turkey, Dr. Copur says the partnership with Eppley has transformed cancer care in central Nebraska. “This is the smallest town I’ve ever lived in, but we’ve accomplished something that’s not commonly done.”

Indeed, Dr. Copur’s clinic boasts clinical trial participation rates as high as 31 percent. Nationally, between 3 percent and 5 percent of patients participate in clinical trials.

Before clinical trials are offered at the sites, UNMC principal investigators visit participating communities to establish proper protocol procedures with the doctors, nurses and pharmacists. Once in place, the hospitals begin to offer clinical trials to their patients.

“Our goal is to partner with every major cancer treatment facility in the state so that every person can access our clinical trials if they are interested,” Dr. Cowan said. Already hospitals in Grand Island, North Platte, Scottsbluff, Kearney, Lincoln and Hastings participate.

During the past five years, more than 300 patients have been involved in cancer center trials through the statewide network.

“Clinical trials advance cancer care no matter where you are,” said Heather Benzell, clinical research nurse at Saint Francis Cancer Treatment Center. “We can’t move forward with treatments without the science of a clinical trial.”

Fredrick, too, is moving forward. She has completed her chemotherapy — an Eppley clinical trial comprised of six, seven-hour long treatment cycles with ctocan and taxol — and underwent a mastectomy followed by radiation therapy. She has continued to work full time for the chamber and was present for her oldest daughter’s June wedding.

“Treatment would have been more time consuming had I not gone to Saint Francis,” she said. “I’m grateful I had that opportunity.” 