

# Oncology using new drugs to battle cancer

BY TONY GLENN  
BLUE RIDGE HEALTHCARE

**VALDESE** - At Blue Ridge HealthCare's Cancer Center, medical oncology professionals are using advanced drugs to treat patients in Burke County and surrounding areas.

Medical Oncology, along with Radiation Oncology, is one of the primary treatment departments in The Cancer Center. It utilizes chemotherapy, hormone therapy and biotherapy to slow or stop the growth of cancers. Biotherapy is the field of treatment that is making use of the most exciting new drugs - drugs that target specific cancers and lessen side affects.

Board Certified Medical Oncologist Christopher R. McDonald, MD, explained that his department is offering much more than just chemotherapy to enhance patient's lives.

"Medical Oncology uses many techniques and therapy options," he said. "Not everyone who comes through the door gets only chemotherapy."

A recipient of the prestigious American College of Surgeons' "Accreditation with Commendation," The Cancer Center is on the forefront of treatment technology and methodology. Both Radiation Oncology and Medical Oncology are performing at levels on par with many big-city cancer care centers in the country.

Physicians and support staff continuously train and study to keep abreast of the latest developments. For Dr. McDonald and his veteran Medical Oncology staff, new cancer-fighting drugs and hormone therapies are showing much promise in slowing or stopping the spread of various forms of the disease.

"We continue to offer chemotherapy (traditional medical cancer therapy)," Dr. McDonald said. "But increasingly we are utilizing non-chemotherapy drugs. Newer agents like Avastin, Vectibix, Erbitux. These are not strictly chemotherapy - they work differently."

According to Dr. McDonald, these drugs attempt to modulate the growth of cancer cells by interfering with factors or functions that allow the cells



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Vicki Dula receives medical oncology treatment at Blue Ridge HealthCare's newly renovated Cancer Center at Valdese Hospital.

to grow and divide. The great advantage these drugs offer is that they can specifically target the cancer cells, while leaving normal cells less affected.

"Chemotherapy is the use of a group of drugs that are directed toward killing cancer cells, but in a non-specific way," Dr. McDonald said. "Because chemotherapy drugs are not directed at a specific quality of the cancer cell, they can cause side effects by damaging normal cells too."

He continued, "These newer drugs work differently. They can be antibodies or other agents directed toward a specific growth factor. There are growth factors in cancer cells that when they're turned on, make the cancers grow and divide. But if you can block those growth receptors then you can turn off the growth. That's what some of these newer drugs are attempting to do."

Since many of the newer drug therapies target specific types of cancer cells, the pa-

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**MARY WISE**  
ONCOLOGY NURSE  
BLUE RIDGE HEALTHCARE CANCER CENTER

tient suffers fewer side affects. Normal cells are left largely unaffected, and the patient's health and comfort level is improved.

Connie Whisnant, Oncology Services Clinical Coordinator, sees great promise in these new biotherapy drugs.

"It's quite amazing what the drugs do," she said. "We have drugs like Avastin that target the vascularization (or blood vessels) of the tumor cells to keep the cancer cells from growing. We have some drugs that inhibit the basic growth of tumor cells. Sometimes we use them in combination with

chemotherapy drugs, and get some good results."

Are the advancements in Medical Oncology really helping to save lives?

Mary Wise, Certified Medical Oncology RN, realizes that in cancer treatment, sometimes prolonging lives is the most realistic goal.

"These days more people are living longer with a diagnosis of cancer than they were decades ago," she said. "We have better anti-nausea medicines that help patients get through their treatments easier. We have therapies available for advanced-stage disease that

we didn't have before. The colon cancer protocols we have now allow us to prolong people's lives."

Wise continued, "In the last several years we've finally seen a slowdown in the death rate from cancer as a whole. Fewer people are now dying from cancer. It's not a very big decrease, but at least it is some - and that's good news."

But Wise added that on some fronts cancer treatment can be about more than just prolonging and improving the quality of life.

"If you have an early stage of the some of the diseases, we can see a very good cure rate," she said. "Hodgkins disease for example - there are a couple of fellows we treated very early on in my tenure here, and they are still out and about and doing well. I know some young ladies who had gynecological malignancies, who have been treated and then gone on to have several children - and they are still disease free. I just worked with a lady earlier

today who is probably seven or eight years out from her breast cancer diagnosis and still has no evidence of the disease."

Dr. McDonald thinks there's reason for optimism in the fight against cancer. "The field is evolving very rapidly," he said. "We are able to offer the new targeted therapies, as well as the other approved protocols that are tried and true."

Dr. McDonald also stressed the importance of followup with patients after treatments - to ensure health and overall peace of mind.

He explained, "When a person has been diagnosed with cancer - even when the cancer is gone as far as we can see - they're insecure about it coming back. We constantly follow up with people and try to provide them with some assurance that the cancer is in remission. If they have a real relapse, we go through the treatment options with them and try to help them decide which option is best."

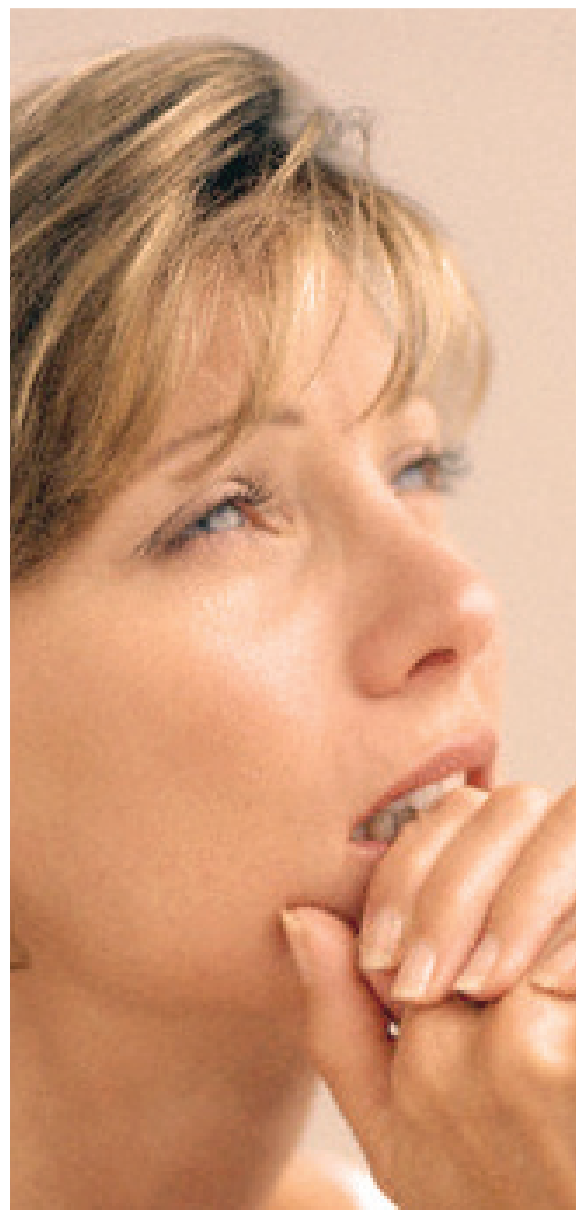
Treatment often begins in discussions with the patients and their families about outcomes, treatment options, advantages and disadvantages. Dr. McDonald likened it to "informed assistance" to help them understand the scope of what they are facing.

He also said that the staff at The Cancer Center is highly competent when it comes to delivering the best identified treatment strategies.

"They are just a superb staff," he said. "The majority of them have many years of experience in dealing with cancer and cancer therapy, including the complications of therapy. We have some newer people who are learning - but they have some of the best people to learn from."

Working in the cancer field is like being on a mission. "Every successful cancer center I've ever worked in has dedicated people who do what they can to help the patients get through a very difficult time in their life," he said. "We have a particularly good group here at Blue Ridge HealthCare."

**TONY GLENN** is a writer and graphic artist in Blue Ridge HealthCare's Marketing and Public Relations Department.



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