

Saving Lives and Meeting Unique Needs of Women

by Sage L. Andrews and Celia Whitten



A new program for women, the McLeod Breast Health Center, promotes continuity of care by bringing the full spectrum of services, from prevention and diagnosis to treatment and support.

Consolidating breast health services under one umbrella was the vision of a group of physicians who supported this effort. These doctors include McLeod Surgeon Dr. Joseph Pearson, Radiologist Dr. Bruce White, Oncologist Dr. Rajesh Bajaj, and Radiation Oncologist Dr. Rhett Spencer.

“We want to be the center of excellence for all types of breast disease,” Dr. Pearson said. “McLeod has always been committed to offering the best and the latest in medical science. Patients have a certain degree of confidence in that.”

One of the strengths of the new program is its central telephone number, 777-4444, that women can call for services.

“With one phone call, a woman can be connected with whatever level of care she needs, to address any breast health issues she may have,” said Jeannette Glenn, Vice President of Human Resources, Education, and Training, whose responsibilities also include McLeod Cancer Services. “This new service, which is designed to be consumer-friendly, should give women a great deal of peace of mind because it will give them the information to make wise decisions about their bodies.”

A major focus for the McLeod Breast Health Center is to provide breast cancer awareness to women in the Pee Dee. A key component of the service, Dr. Pearson believes, is an information center for women where they can find out what they need to know – whether it is information about treatment, support groups, or sources for wigs or other personal items to make them feel and look better. The McLeod Resource Center is being revitalized as that education and support center and recently has moved to the Levy House on the McLeod campus, a location that will be more accessible for visitors.

Early detection is at the heart of the McLeod Breast Health Center. McLeod provides free breast screenings for the

community, every April and October. Routine mammograms, which also lead to early detection, are performed by McLeod mammography technologists, all of whom are certified to perform mammograms, ultrasounds and biopsies providing patients with continuity of care through the diagnosis process.

Additionally, McLeod offers cancer research with 45 cancer trials currently available for participation by cancer patients in the Pee Dee.

McLeod also has the unique diagnostic capability of taking internal pictures of the breast through Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), a routine screening alternative for women who have a family history of breast cancer. In addition,

Breast MRI has been shown to detect small breast lesions that are sometimes missed by mammography. If a lesion is detected during the Breast MRI procedure, the Breast MRI is equipped so that a biopsy can be performed during the patient’s scan.

Individualized support and treatment is a hallmark of the new center. The Breast Health Specialist, a role filled by Maureen Counihan, coordinates the unique clinical, educational, and support needs for each breast cancer patient and her family members. Counihan is available to her patients by beeper, the McLeod Breast Health Center phone number or via the McLeod website to calm fears, answer questions, and

make sure women get the support and treatment they need.

Each week, Counihan presents cases to a multi-disciplinary team of physicians who collectively decide on the best treatment plan for each breast cancer patient. “All disciplines – radiology, radiation oncology, pathology, oncology, and surgery – discuss the cases,” Glenn explained. “The recommendations are then given back to the patient’s

physician for treatment. The patient makes the final decision with her physician, but the physician has had five consults on the case.”

Designated as the region’s only Accredited Cancer Treatment Center by the Commission on Cancer of the American College of Surgeons, McLeod is fully equipped to treat a wide-range of cancers through surgery, including the use of minimally invasive procedures and bloodless surgery, as well as Chemotherapy and Radiation. “McLeod is the only institution in the Pee Dee with all the pieces of the puzzle under one roof,” said Dr. Pearson. “We want to make the individual patient’s entry into the system as painless and seamless as possible.”

A diagnosis or even suspicion of breast cancer can be psychologically devastating for a woman, added Dr. Pearson. “But there are a lot of factors that can make that experience less difficult.”

Dr. Pearson, whose surgical practice is 30 to 40 percent cancer-related, says he and his eight partners at Pee Dee Surgical Group realize how devastating a cancer diagnosis can be for their patients.

“We’ve eliminated the usual waiting time for an appointment. We have made a commitment that anybody with a breast problem will be seen by one of the doctors within 48 hours. When the radiologist says a patient needs further evaluation, we want to be sure that patient doesn’t slip through the cracks. The timeframe from an abnormal mammogram to treatment has been shortened to about a week and a half,” added Dr. Pearson.

Both Counihan and Glenn stress the

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emphasis of the McLeod Breast Health Center on early diagnosis and prevention of breast cancer. “This will be a model for women to learn to do breast self-exams and to detect cancer early on,” Glenn said.



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(from left to right) Leslie Doss, Sonda Jett-Clair and Gwen Stokes, all Breast Cancer Survivors, received outstanding care through the McLeod Breast Health Center.



If you have questions about breast cancer, you can contact the McLeod Breast Health Center Monday through Friday at (843) 777-4444 or log onto www.McLeodHealth.org anytime and click on “Ask the Breast Health Specialist.” Email your question directly to the McLeod Breast Health Specialist.