



Owen Heleen, Rhode Island Foundation

Rhode Island Foundation Funds Innovations in Diabetes and Cancer Care

“When we can bring together a generous donor and a creative institution with people who want to find a better way to serve their patients, we do our best work,” says Owen Heleen, vice president for grant programs at the Rhode Island Foundation, the state’s oldest and largest community foundation, which has supported Rhode Island Hospital programs since its inception.

The Foundation has found the right combination in two new programs that are revolutionizing patient care at Rhode Island Hospital.

The first is the **Yes! I Can Be Healthy** diabetes group education program that uses the Thumbs UP! *Living Well*

with Diabetes multimedia curriculum for type 2 diabetes management, created by Susan Oliverio, MD, MPH, director of Rhode Island Hospital’s medical primary care unit

diabetes group education program. The four-week program provides patients, clinicians, residents and medical students with a unique opportunity to interact as a group, to learn from one another and to discover better ways to care

for this chronic disease. The Rhode Island Foundation awarded a grant of \$52,116 for the 2010 calendar year.

The curriculum has helped bridge communication barriers for patients with language and cultural differences.

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— Susan Oliverio, MD, MPH

It includes a 72-page booklet and more than 600 colorful slides. “We express health information simply, using pictures whenever possible, giving the ‘thumbs up’ for nutritional and lifestyle choices that are good and ‘thumbs down’ for those which are bad,” says Oliverio.

Lourdes Pichardo, a diabetes self-management master trainer certified by the Rhode Island Department of Health, is bilingual and also diabetic, and adept at connecting with patients, many of whom speak Spanish and often are uninsured. “The patients see me as their ambassador, and I am very excited to see the changes that they have made: eating healthier, exercising, checking their blood sugar levels and taking their medication,” she says.

“For some patients, this is their first graduation ceremony. They are happy to receive their diploma and a gift card,” says Donnah

Mathews, MD, associate director of the medical primary care unit and attending physician.

This empowering program, which has a waiting list of more than 100 patients, has shown a measurable change in the ability of patients to manage their diabetes.

Visits to the emergency department by patients monitored after taking part in this program were reduced. This means fewer adverse events for those patients and greater savings on costly treatments and tests for the hospital.

“Without the Rhode Island Foundation’s support, we would not have had the ability to pilot test the group structure, format and curriculum,” says Oliverio. “Foundation funds also provide tools such as pedometers, glucometers and healthy food. We look forward to continuing to evolve and improve the program.”

The second program funded by the Rhode Island Foundation—with a grant of \$71,500 for the 2010 calendar year—is the addition of a **Head and Neck Patient Navigator at Rhode Island Hospital’s Comprehensive Cancer Center**. Julie Gray, RN, took on this role in June 2009 after serving as a breast cancer navigator at The Miriam Hospital.

“The health care maze can be a daunting trail to travel, especially for someone who may be sick for the first time in their lives,” says Gray. “The devastation of hearing the words ‘you have cancer’ is bad enough, but then you’re told you’ll need additional tests, procedures and appointments. It can

be absolutely overwhelming, and people often don’t know where or even how to begin the process.”

That’s where Gray comes in. Acting as a medical liaison, she explains complex procedures, activates hospital and community resources on the patient’s behalf, and even schedules appointments and arranges transportation for those in need. She also tries to attend as many procedures with the patient as possible. “This grant ensures that there is someone who walks the patient and family through this process while providing guidance and education along the way,” she says.

Treatment for this cancer is very aggressive and involves simultaneous chemotherapy and radiation, often leaving patients exhausted and debilitated. It can also be disfiguring.

Unlike many other diseases, cancers of the head and

neck require interactions with many other health care disciplines. In addition to the oncologist and radiologist, these patients will visit with the nutritionist, clinical social worker, speech therapist and physical therapist.

Most patients require

a chest port for chemotherapy infusion and a feeding tube placed in their stomachs, as the effects of radiation may cause inflammation that makes swallowing difficult.

To tie everything together, Gray has established a head and neck cancer group that meets weekly to review cases. Participants include all of the departments involved in the patient’s care. “This multidisciplinary approach greatly improves patient care and has an optimal effect on patient outcome. We present our challenges and work as a team to support and reinforce each other’s work,” Gray says. According to Ariel Birnbaum, MD, head and neck cancer specialist, “The navigation program is the glue to multidisciplinary care.”

Owen Heleen from the Rhode Island Foundation concludes, “We want to support people who are passionate about making change in Rhode Island. We are proud and privileged to help Rhode Island Hospital build a culture of innovation that informs our efforts to build a stronger Rhode Island.”

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