

NHS Cancer Center Provides High-Quality, Personalized Care

TAHLEQUAH, Oklahoma – Northeastern Health System (NHS), in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, offers the highest level of cancer care one might expect of any metropolitan city hospital. Things like advanced technology, experienced oncologists and state-of-the-art equipment; however, NHS offers a level of compassion and empathy not common at other institutions, thanks in part, to the facility's rural setting.

When cancer survivor, Phyllis Smith, was diagnosed with colon cancer, she chose to receive both chemotherapy and radiation treatments at NHS. Smith currently serves as a PRN Human Resources Associate since retirement as the Director of Human Resources for Northeastern Health System.

“I initially chose NHS because it was close to home and I wasn't sure how the treatments would affect me. I didn't want to have a long travel time if the treatments made me feel fatigued or ill,” she said. “Being close to home also meant I could continue to do my job and only miss work a short time due to my radiation treatments each day and my chemo treatments each week.”

Frederick Willison, M.D., Medical Director and radiation oncologist at NHS, practiced at one of the larger Tulsa hospitals for more than 20 years. Willison frequently saw patients who traveled great distances to receive treatment.

“The primary advantage of NHS is the availability of state-of-the-art therapy close to home. The oncology I practice in Tahlequah, including the technology and equipment, are equal to that available in my prior practice,” said Willison. “However, many cancer patients cannot easily travel long distances for treatment when they are not feeling well, and often require daily treatments for several weeks. The availability of the same quality of care delivered locally is a big advantage. In addition, the staff providing care at NHS is connected to the community and its people in a way that out-of-town facilities cannot replicate. That makes the care infinitely superior.”

The mixture of quality and compassion in patient care is one of the things that prompted Dr. Vicki Baker, then President of Oklahoma Oncology, to partner with Northeastern Health System to found the cancer center in Tahlequah.

“Our group partnered with NHS to build a comprehensive cancer program to serve Northeastern Oklahoma,” said Baker. “Our nine-provider group chose NHS, in part, for its progressive, physician-friendly culture,” said Baker.

This physician and patient-friendly culture are what sets NHS apart from the competition. Providers are invested in the care of their patients in a way not commonly found in larger institutions. By serving in a rural area, providers realize they are treating their family, friends, co-workers, and fellow community members. People they see outside of the cancer center’s walls.

“The staff in both the radiation and chemotherapy areas are second to none. Honestly, initially I thought I was receiving the star treatment because I’m a hospital employee, until I saw that they gave the star treatment to all their patients,” said Smith. “Another reason to choose NHS is they get results. I was able to avoid a second round of planned chemo because they got me the best possible results with my initial chemo and radiation therapies. My surgeon commented to me that he was quite impressed with their work and the outcome of my treatments.”

NHS cancer services were established on the belief that patients in Northeastern Oklahoma should receive compassionate care of the highest quality. Dr. Joe Lynch, Director of Bone Marrow Transplant for Oklahoma Oncology has witnessed the progress made by NHS throughout the years.

“NHS has demonstrated its commitment to excellence by providing local access and creating an integrated cancer center of excellence,” he said.

Having practiced for more than 40 years in metropolitan facilities, Theodore W. Pollock, DO, FACOI, and NHS’ Director of Oncology, believes patients in Tahlequah and the surrounding communities are fortunate to have a cancer treatment center so close to home.

“Northeastern Health System offers its local population up-to-date, quality, cancer care without having to travel to distant metropolitan areas” he said. “We treat all types of adult cancers and all stages, with the exception of acute leukemia. We not only treat our patients with classical chemotherapy agents, but also with targeted agents and immune therapy.”

The list of services offered at NHS is extensive, technical, and filled with medical abbreviations; but it's the comradery shared with the staff and fellow patients that put the patients at ease and allow for a more meaningful treatment experience.

“The terminology is not necessarily important. The fact is, there are very few technologies available elsewhere that are not available in Tahlequah,” said Willison. “NHS patients should have confidence that they will receive not only high-quality medical care, but that that care is delivered with compassion by local professionals who value and respect the patients in our community.”

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Dr. Vicki Baker, oncologist, served as the Medical Director of medical oncology for the Tulsa and Tahlequah campuses from 2008-2018.

Dr. Pollock currently serves as the Director of Oncology for Northeastern Health System in Tahlequah. He has practiced medical oncology for more than 40 years in New York, Columbus, Ohio, and Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Dr. Willison has practiced radiation oncology for 28 years and serves as the Medical Director of radiation oncology in Tahlequah. He has worked at the National Cancer Institute, part of the Institutes of Health, in Washington, D.C., and spent more than 20 years at St. John Medical Center in Tulsa, where he served as the Medical Director in later years.