

SOUTH FLORIDA BUSINESS JOURNAL

SPECIAL REPORT

CANCER DOESN'T WAIT

Health threat
grows unchecked
amid Covid-19

BRIAN BANDELL
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CANCER TREATMENT & RESEARCH

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CANCER TREATMENT & RESEARCH

COVID-19 CRISIS COULD WORSEN OUTCOME FOR CANCER PATIENTS

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The formidable challenge of fighting cancer has grown more difficult during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the ramifications could be felt for years to come.

The coronavirus's impact on cancer patients is a dire example of the collateral damage wrought by the pandemic that goes beyond the sobering number of more than 400,000 deaths in the U.S. from Covid-19.

Most concerning for health experts is that screenings for cancer have plunged during the pandemic as patients avoid seeing their doctors, fearful of contracting Covid-19. This reticence allows tumors to grow undetected and advanced-stage cancer more deadly and expensive to treat. Even workers in their prime could be sidelined for arduous treatments to deal with a cancer that grew unchecked for too long.

In the U.S., the overall death rate from cancer declined 29% from 1991 to 2017, according to the American Cancer Society, the largest rate drop for a similar period. That represents 3 million fewer deaths over that time.

However, oncologists say fewer cancers are being diagnosed in the U.S. this year due to the alarming drop in patient screenings, which could reverse those hard-fought gains.

"If you're not diagnosed now with a mammogram when it's an early-stage cancer, it's likely to be found in a year or two when it's a late-stage cancer," said Dr. Michael Cusnir, chief of oncology at Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami Beach. "That's when the cancer is not [always] curable."

NEW NORMAL OF CANCER CARE

The pandemic didn't bring cancer care to a halt in South Florida, but it caused many delays in treatment. Most willing cancer patients have resumed care, but under meticulous protocols to avoid Covid-19.

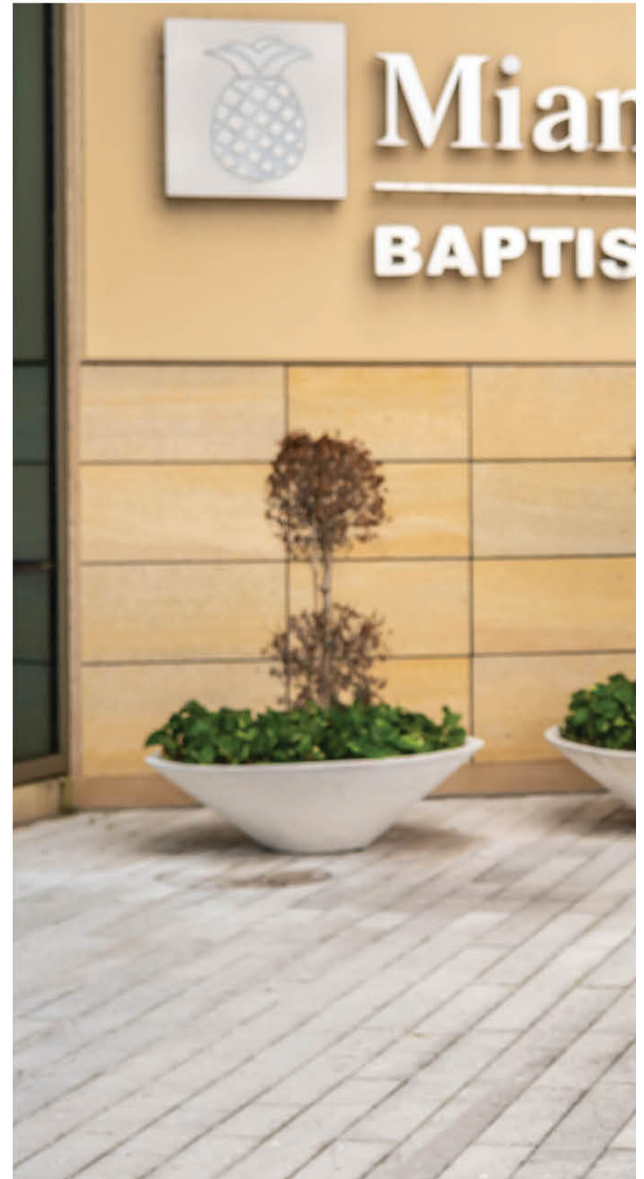
Dr. Louise Morrell, medical director of the Lynn Cancer Institute at Boca Raton Regional Hospital, said one of the hardest times in her career occurred in April when appointments for 48 patients in line for cancer surgeries had to be rescheduled. The center needed time to acquire personal protective equipment and establish protocols to keep patients and providers safe. All of the surgeries were rescheduled within two weeks.

One of the most vexing questions for cancer patients is whether the disease, or treatment for it, makes them more vulnerable to Covid-19.

Morrell said the data is preliminary because the virus is so new, but a bedridden cancer patient is probably at greater risk from the coronavirus. There's also a likelihood that patients receiving immunotherapy treatments could suffer more from Covid-19 because their immune systems have been weakened, she added. Chemotherapy, on the other hand, likely doesn't make patients more vulnerable to the virus, she said.

However, doctors generally recommend that patients with Covid-19 delay their cancer treatments until they recover from the virus, Morrell said.

Dr. Michael Zinner, CEO and executive medical director of the Miami Cancer Institute, part of Baptist Health South Florida, said surgeries for some cancer patients were delayed during the pandemic because hospital beds needed to be freed up for coronavirus patients.



BY THE NUMBERS

23%

Year-over-year decline in use of Top 23 oncology drugs, April 2020

31%

Decline in use of those same drugs, July 2020

SOURCE: JCO CLINICAL CANCER INFORMATICS

Another challenge is that some cancer patients have active Covid-19 infections, and their cancer treatments can't wait. These patients enter through a special door and their treatment rooms are thoroughly cleaned. If they need an operation, the medical team takes an extra hour suiting up in PPE and preparing the operating suite.

Scheduling surgery on a person with Covid-19 is risky because the anesthesia may tax their lungs, Zinner said.

"They are immunocompromised patients to begin with and, if you add the fact they have this virus, you have to be very careful how you treat them," he said. "Patients who have Covid and get surgery have a higher risk

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of post-operation complications.”

For this reason, vaccinating cancer patients should be a priority, Zinner said.

In the early months of the pandemic, nearly 75% of Memorial Cancer Institute visits were conducted through telemedicine, said Dr. Brian Hunis, medical director of oncology at Memorial Healthcare System.

“Telemedicine is not the panacea that people believe it to be,” he said. “Most of us went into medicine because we appreciate and we enjoy the interaction with a patient face to face. It starts when you lay eyes on someone.”

Now, doctors at the institute see 60 to 80 patients a week, and there have been no clusters of infections in the clinic, he said.



DR. ZEINA NAHLEH,
Cleveland Clinic
Florida

That’s only slightly below normal levels, but Hunis lost one patient to cancer because he came to the office for a follow-up appointment too late. No matter how scary Covid-19 is, patients must address the elephant in the room first, and that is cancer, he said.

“We have cases where cancer spread to different organs because they delayed care,” said Dr. Zeina Nahleh, director of the cancer center and chair of hematology-oncology at Cleveland Clinic Florida in Weston.

She often has to convince patients that the clinic is a safe place and that they can’t afford to delay cancer treatment.

“Many patients were skeptical at first, but once they are here and see the temperature

◀ *Dr. Michael Zinner, CEO and executive medical director of the Miami Cancer Institute at Baptist Health South Florida*

checks, social distancing and cleaning, they feel comfortable to proceed with their treatment and care with no problems,” Nahleh said.

JOB LOSSES BURDEN PATIENTS

Another tragic side effect of the pandemic for some cancer patients is the loss of health insurance when they need it most.

The wave of nationwide job losses displaced 7.7 million workers who lost their employer-sponsored health insurance, according to the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research and the Commonwealth Fund. The study did not break numbers down by state, but South Florida was one of the hardest-hit areas for job losses.

Some of those patients sought insurance through COBRA, but that program can be expensive. Otherwise, they would have to switch to an individual plan with new benefits and potentially different doctors – if they can find insurance at all.

Zinner said the Miami Cancer Institute has seen more unemployed patients without insurance during the pandemic. The situation could worsen since new insurance plans, often with higher deductibles, went into effect Jan. 1. Many cancer patients are already struggling with existing high deductibles or paying the full premiums to maintain their health plans after losing a job, he said.

This has had a disproportionate impact on minorities, who suffered more job losses. Cancer treatments aren’t emergency medicine, so patients need insurance, especially if they require expensive drugs. Even changing insurance plans could make it hard for them to access the same providers and treatments as before.

“There should be action by Congress to help improve access to care and make sure patients don’t fall into the cracks,” Nahleh said. “Many patients have no choice but to apply for coverage from the government. There is a lot of bureaucracy, and patients are losing time.”

DROP IN SCREENINGS TROUBLES DOCTORS

The sharp decline in cancer screenings has the potential to cost many lives if patients don’t see their doctors soon.

According to the Health Care Cost Institute, mammograms and pap smears were down nearly 80% and colonoscopies were down almost 90%, year over year, in April. By August, these screenings were still down by double digits.

The number of new patients diagnosed at cancer centers such as the Memorial Cancer

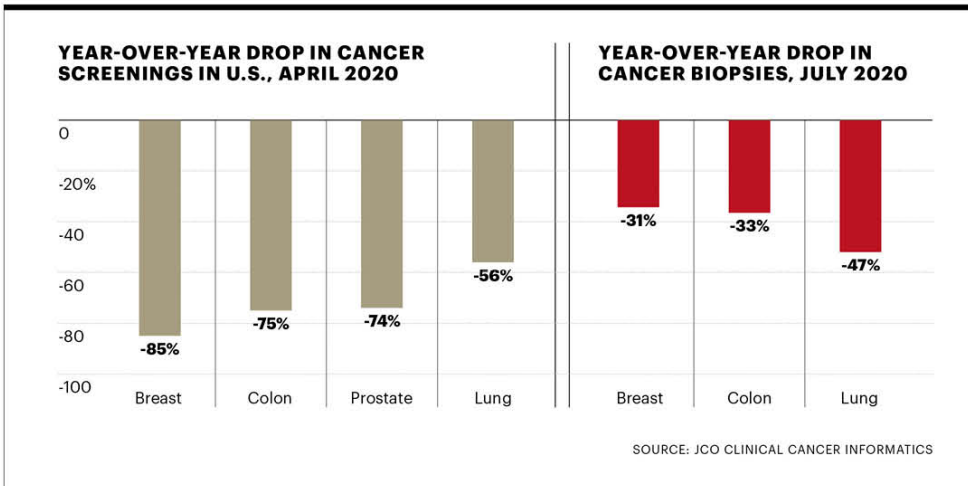
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Patients and visitors are screened for Covid exposure and symptoms before entering the Miami Cancer Institute at Baptist Health South Florida. Incoming patients who don't pass the screening protocols must be tested for Covid at separate testing stations behind the curtain.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

Institute has fallen significantly since the pandemic started, but that's not cause to celebrate, experts say. Many patients don't show up for screening appointments or to examine lumps, so cancers go undetected. Health officials expect screenings to remain below normal levels until much of the population is vaccinated.

"Those cancers are happening," Lynn Cancer Institute's Morrell said. "They will just be diagnosed later and with more serious consequences. A delay in diagnosis means bigger surgeries, more chemotherapy and a higher

risk of complications."

At Miami Cancer Institute, screenings plummeted 90% in March and April, and are still down 40% to 50%, Zinner said. Yet, the hospital strictly enforces safety protocols to protect patients from the coronavirus.

"Because our health care facilities are so diligent about testing, sanitization and mask wearing, it's actually safer to get your mammogram here than to go to Publix for fruits and vegetables," Zinner said. "This is not a time to decrease seeing your physician when it's appropriate."

For example, thousands of people could develop colon cancer if they don't schedule a

colonoscopy in time to detect polyps, he said.

Oncologists fear the cancer mortality rate could more than double over the next five years because of delays in screenings due to the pandemic, Mount Sinai's Cusnir said. A routine mammogram reduces a woman's risk of dying from cancer within 10 years by 41%, so it's crucial to schedule those visits.

"Because of the delays in screening, we will see later-stage cancers instead of early stage, where the screening would have saved their life," Cusnir said.

VACCINE BRINGS HOPE

The development of several government-approved Covid-19 vaccines has brought hope to cancer researchers. Two of the coronavirus vaccines, one by Pfizer and another by Moderna, are already being administered nationwide, including South Florida.

Using innovative technologies to create effective vaccines for a virus less than a year after it was discovered is an unprecedented scientific achievement.

Decades of vaccine research created the techniques researchers could apply to Covid-19, and that could show promise for some types of cancer. A host of clinical trials for cancer vaccines will be based on similar techniques used to boost the immune system, launching a new frontier in the long-standing fight against cancer, experts say.

"It demonstrates how scientific research can impact a disease when everyone is on it," Morrell said. "It was as if anybody working on anything else united and everyone worked on Covid. It shows you what scientific research can do when we are united." ❧