

CASE STUDY

Partnering with AON Allows Hematology Oncology Clinic to Offer High-Quality, Yet Affordable, Care

ABOUT HEMATOLOGY ONCOLOGY CLINIC

With three locations in Louisiana, Hematology Oncology Clinic (HOC) has been treating cancer patients in Baton Rouge and the surrounding communities for more than 30 years. This community-based clinic emphasizes personal, affordable care where physicians and nurse practitioners establish trust through creating relationships with their patients as well as the patients' families and caregivers.

The practice's staff includes four physicians along with six advanced practitioners, oncology certified registered nurses and licensed practical nurses. HOC provides access to innovative clinical trials, home delivery of oral cancer medications from a specialty, in-house pharmacy, timely labs and pathology reports, and on-site infusion therapy. HOC also offers comprehensive supportive care such as 24/7 access to care management, nutrition counseling and much more.



- 30 years of providing care
- Four physicians
- Six advanced practitioners
- Three locations

THE CHALLENGE: PROVIDING AFFORDABLE CARE TO PATIENTS

Diagnostic and therapeutic advances have led to increased cancer survival and remission rates as well as a higher quality of life. But they have also contributed to what can often be exorbitant costs for treatment, particularly when it is delivered in a hospital setting.

The physicians at HOC caught a glimpse of this when they entered the practice into a partnership with a local hospital. While the relationship facilitated access to ancillary services such as radiation, radiology, and pathology/lab for the practice's patients, and also helped develop service lines for specific cancer

subtypes, they came at too high a price.

"We felt the practice going through a hospital was punishing to patients in regards to cost," said Michael J. Castine, III, MD, medical oncologist with HOC. "We could still do all the things we had been doing, but we were limited in how we could best serve our patients."

The physicians at HOC understood that the best way to treat their patients was in a community setting that allowed the practice to keep providing top-quality care to its patients, but at a fraction of the cost.

"Cancer care costs at a hospital are 40% more than costs for treatment in a community-based practice," said Dr. Castine. "And there's no difference in expertise or treatment."

HOC decided to end its hospital partnership, but still wanted to provide its patients with access to research and other services that are usually beyond the reach of an independent practice. The practice needed a partner that could offer the same services as a hospital but without the high costs to their patients.

THE SOLUTION: PARTNERING WITH THE RIGHT NETWORK

HOC joined the American Oncology Network (AON) in 2018.

“It was one of the fairest agreements I’ve ever seen, one where each party takes risks,” said Dr. Castine. “We didn’t see that in any other partnership opportunity. In other agreements, we were the ones taking all the risk by signing on with a large network.”

Partnering with AON has allowed HOC to enhance its existing programs while helping create new ones. For example, with AON’s support, HOC onboarded a pathology program that not only facilitates more effective communication between the practice and the network’s pathologists, but its turnaround times are superior to industry norms with flow cytometry results delivered within 72 hours. HOC was also the only practice in the area selected to participate in the Oncology Care Model (OCM)—something it would not have been able to do without the AON infrastructure behind it.

A value-based care model from the

Center for Medicare & Medicaid Innovation, the OCM sought to provide higher quality, more highly coordinated oncology care at lower cost. Participating practices entered payment arrangements that include financial and performance accountability for episodes of care surrounding chemotherapy administration to cancer patients. Practices also committed to providing enhanced services to Medicare beneficiaries such as care coordination, navigation, and national treatment guidelines for care.

At HOC, a significant benefit of OCM participation was the addition of care managers to its team of professionals. These are nurses who guide patients through the treatment process, providing comfort, reinforcement and access to speak with a live person 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for questions and even to help determine if a trip to the ER is necessary. This cut down on costly, often unnecessary trips to the emergency room as well as hospital admissions.

“The biggest thing to cutting costs is trying to keep people out of the hospital and the ER. AON has helped us do that with OCM support services, including nurses calling our patients at home.”



Gerald P. Miletello, MD
Hematology Oncology Clinic



ENHANCEMENT AND EXPANSION

A significant benefit of an AON partnership is the network's centralized in-house specialty pharmacy, which provides patients access to cutting-edge medications quicker than ever before. Prior to joining the network, HOC's patients often had to wait two weeks for medication to be delivered. Now, medications arrive at a patient's doorstep in about four days.

"The pharmacy has done more to help our patients than anything we could have done," said Dr. Castine. "It's been a godsend."

Adds Dr. Miletello: “I’ve been doing this for 30 years and no one comes close to the AON pharmacy. They go above and beyond for these patients. They are truly phenomenal.”

HOC's research team, which initially consisted of Dr. Castine and members of the nursing staff, has also been strengthened through working with

AON. Consequently, the practice became a strategic research site for the Sarah Cannon Research Institute in Nashville, Tenn., one of the world's leading clinical research organizations conducting community-based clinical trials throughout the United States and United Kingdom.

AON also helped HOC find a new location in Zachary that was still easily accessible for its patients—a move made necessary when HOC severed its relationship with a local hospital. With the network's support, HOC was able to transition seamlessly into the new office in a span of just 30 days.

The network also helped HOC with construction of a new 17,000-square-foot location in Baton Rouge, managing everything from architectural issues to helping with patient flow design to implementing hardware and IT equipment.

The \$3.1 million facility is located in the Pennington Cancer Center on the campus of Baton Rouge General. Made possible by the strong partnership between HOC and Baton Rouge General, the facility symbolizes one of the area's most important healthcare assets. The new facility provides the

17,000 SQUARE-FOOT LOCATION

37 CHEMOTHERAPY INFUSION STATIONS

20 PRIVATE EXAM ROOMS

\$3.1 MILLION FACILITY

area's cancer patients with convenient access to physician services, chemotherapy and other advanced treatments, along with laboratory and specialty pharmacy services, and clinical trials—all under one roof.



A PHYSICIAN-RUN NETWORK

One of the pluses of AON is that it allows the physicians to run their individual practices and provide what they believe is the most effective and efficient care for their patients.

Decisions at each practice are left up to those who are working there.

“I’ve not had to change the way I treat a patient, and that was my biggest

concern,” said Dr. Miletello. “I’ve practiced with the same guidelines I’ve always used. There are four of us in this practice and everyone is very content with the AON relationship.”

Most importantly, the benefits have helped enhance the lives of HOC’s top priority: its patients.

“That is something we could not have done on our own as an independent practice,” said Dr. Castine. “AON has allowed us to not just survive but thrive. And the people who benefit the most from that are the patients.”

\$9 Million IN GRANTS OR FREE MEDICATION

In less than two years, AON helped HOC access \$9 million in grants or free medication on behalf of its patients. That money has also helped patients offset co-pays and other out-of-pocket costs associated with treatments.



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