

## CASE STUDY



# AON Partnership Lets Messino Cancer Centers Maintain Independence and Achieve Expansion Goals

## About Messino Cancer Centers

Founded by Michael Messino, MD, Messino Cancer Centers (MCC) in western North Carolina provides treatment for adults diagnosed with all types of cancers and blood disorders. The physicians have a 30-year history of providing high-quality, research-backed, personalized care to patients in the community setting—close to their loved ones and where they live and work.

The MCC staff is comprised of experienced physicians, advanced practice providers, nurses and a clinical support staff dedicated to providing the most advanced and innovative treatments. Its physicians provide cutting-edge, evidence-based treatment that incorporates personalized medicine, standard and nationally accepted guidelines, and clinical trials. Through its care management team and oncology-certified staff, MCC supports its patients through all phases of diagnosis and treatment.

Based in Asheville, MCC also offers care at five additional sites in WNC—Brevard, Franklin, Marion, Spruce Pine and Sylva.



**31** years of providing care

**16** physicians

**15** advanced practitioners

**Six** locations

## THE CHALLENGE: Finding a Like-Minded Partner to Enhance Patient Care

After ending its partnership with a local hospital, MCC sought to join a national network of oncologists that would allow it to keep pace with the rapidly changing healthcare industry. This would help MCC stay nimble and adapt to changes in regulatory matters, case structures and payer requirements. A national partner would also enable the practice to implement the Center for Medicare & Medicaid Innovation Center's Oncology Care Model (OCM) and provide its physicians with access to the most up-to-date treatments and medications to help better treat their patients—opportunities that could easily overwhelm many independent community-based oncology practices. MCC was also hoping to give its patients access to

cutting-edge clinical trials. Situated in a rural region of North Carolina, the practice and its patients are hours away from the major metropolitan cities and academic medical centers where clinical trials are typically based, such as Duke University Medical Center in Durham and University of North Carolina School of Medicine in Chapel Hill. Joining a network would allow the MCC physicians, who the practice's patients already know and trust, to conduct clinical trials right in their own communities.

However, it was important to MCC that it maintain an exceptional level of care led by its staff of Board-certified physicians to run their practice as they see fit.

American Oncology Network (AON) checked off all those boxes, leading to a partnership that started on Jan. 1, 2020.

## THE SOLUTION: Best of Both Worlds

AON provides MCC with support and expertise on matters such as revenue cycle management, credentialing, and marketing, as well as access to an enhanced IT infrastructure, in-house pathology lab and procurement services—all while allowing MCC's leadership team to run the practice just as intended for the last 30 years.

"AON provides community oncology practices with the ability to function as independently as possible while supplying the necessary resources, support, and guidance that is critical when navigating through an ever-changing and complicated healthcare system," said Tena Messer, Executive Vice President of Practice Operations for MCC and AON.

Partnering with AON let MCC add sub-specialties to its practice, where its physicians now focus on breast, lung and prostate cancer, as well as brain tumors and hematologic malignancies. Being backed by a nationally renowned network while empowering its physicians to maintain their clinical independence has also helped MCC recruit several high-caliber oncologists to its staff—something that was previously out of reach.

"We've always been a physician-led practice. That is what has always distinguished us from other practices in the region," said Christopher Chay, MD, an oncologist with MCC.



AON allows us to continue practicing with the same degree of patient focus that we always have. They didn't force us into their mold. Instead, AON allowed us to remain true to who we are while giving us the back-end support we needed to be successful."

**Christopher Chay, MD**  
Messino Cancer Centers



## Enhanced Patient Care

Most importantly, joining AON has allowed MCC to take its quality of patient care to another level, beginning with better access to clinical trials. Additionally, working with AON's full-service oral oncolytics pharmacy, which contracts with a wide range of health plans, has granted MCC's patients access to a broader range of prescription medications. Nationwide recruiting supported by AON also allowed MCC to double its staff in less than a year.

MCC's care management has also been enhanced. Its patients can now work with licensed dietitians and also have access to supportive care services such as palliative care. AON has also supported MCC's non-oncology infusion services by providing back-end support, such as coding and billing, to help ensure appropriate reimbursement. This allows MCC to continue to offer this service to its patients while providing financial aid when needed.

This enhancement in care has come at no additional cost to the patient—in fact, Messer said most patients have seen their costs reduced by about 30%.

"If we have any questions or need anything in regard to our practices, any one of our leaders can reach out to AON and receive an answer right away," Messer said. "That is really comforting, because in today's healthcare environment, having that degree of access is critical."

## Support During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020—approximately two months after MCC entered its partnership with AON. The timing proved to be fortuitous, as AON wasted little time helping MCC adjust by supplying the infrastructure and training required to get telehealth up and running in a matter of weeks. This allowed MCC's physicians, licensed social workers, dietitians and care managers to monitor patients remotely to reduce the risk of exposure.

On the employee side, AON made sure all of MCC's staff had ample personal protection equipment (PPE) and cleaning products. When appropriate, staff at all six MCC clinics were able to work remotely, making it easier for patients and staff to practice social distancing measures.

AON also made sure not to penalize anyone for taking absences related to COVID-19. Emergency sick leave was provided, allowing employees who contracted or were exposed to the virus the time they needed to recover or safely quarantine without using any of their paid time off.

"When the pandemic hit, AON dealt with everything very efficiently," Messer said. "The communication, resources, and support provided were instrumental in the practice successfully meeting the challenge of COVID."



## The AON Difference

Partnering with AON allowed MCC to stay open and ahead of the curve throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic

<b>Telehealth</b>	Offering virtual appointments
<b>Supplies</b>	Enough PPE & cleaning equipment
<b>Operations</b>	Training on proper procedures
<b>Staff Care</b>	Emergency sick leave

## The Right Decision

As oncology continues to evolve and new treatments and modalities of care are introduced, MCC's partnership with AON will help provide frontline access to the newest medications and support services—a huge benefit to the patients, who have always been MCC's top priority.

"We wouldn't be as successful without AON," said Dr. Chay. "Joining AON has been important for the staff, important for the practice and important for the patients. We are appreciative of everything they have done for us so far."



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