

Physicians Provide “Gateway to Hope” For Low-Income Women With Breast Cancer

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Physicians Provide "Gateway to Hope" for Low-Income Women With Breast Cancer

"Clinic without walls" relies on donated medical services and supplies to assist uninsured and underinsured women overcome the financial burden of breast cancer treatment

By David Caplin, MD

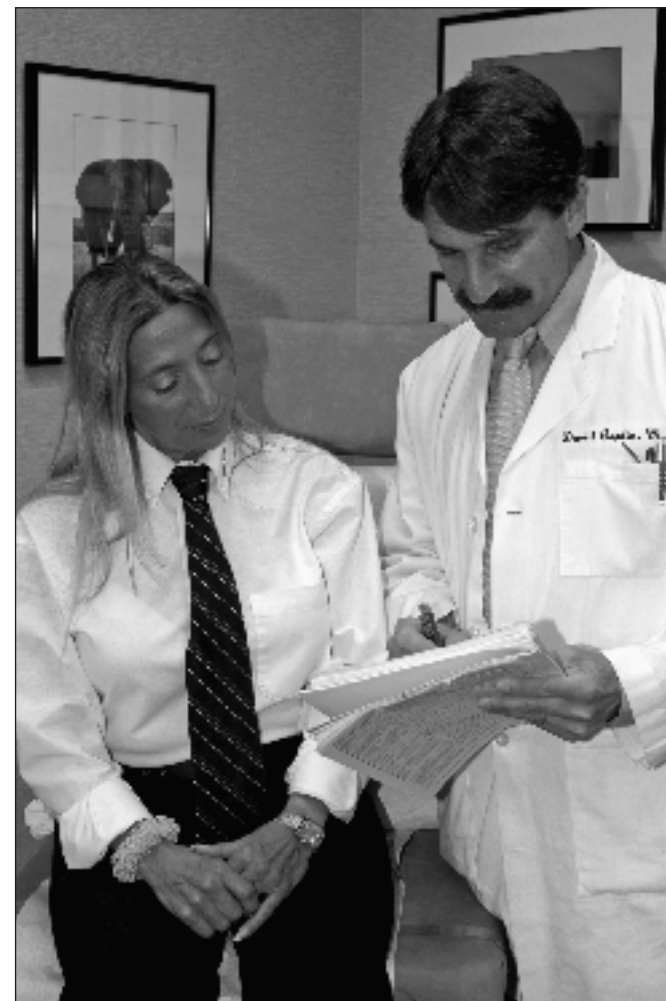
When a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer, in addition to the emotional burden of acknowledging and fighting the disease, she is faced with an overwhelming financial responsibility. The cost for standard breast cancer treatment can range as high as \$100,000 to \$200,000 per patient. For the increasing number of women who are uninsured or underinsured, the financial burden of treatment for breast cancer can be so daunting that it prevents them from seeking treatment at the time of diagnosis.

Take for example, the patient in her early 40's who found a lump in her breast, and lived with that knowledge for two years before seeking medical assistance. She was the sole provider for her family, and although employed, had no health insurance and did not qualify for any public assistance. This patient was aware of the importance of early diagnosis and treatment; however, she felt that she could not stop working and leave her family without financial support. Two years later she died of metastatic disease.

In 2004, there were over 4,000 new cases of breast cancer diagnosed in Missouri, including a considerable number of uninsured and underinsured cases. With significant Medicaid cutbacks in Missouri there will be increased numbers of patients not eligible to receive care. In the past, these patients would have been able to access care through state and federal programs.

As a plastic surgeon, I recognized, as did my colleague, Dr. Marlys Schuh, a surgical oncologist, that there are a significant number of low-income women in our area who cannot access medical care. To help these women, we established a charitable program called Gateway to Hope.

Gateway to Hope arranges comprehensive medical and surgical treatment to assist those women in St. Louis, who may delay



Dr. David Caplin, right, consults with patient Roberta Losciuto through the Gateway to Hope program.

or even decline treatment for breast cancer, because of financial concerns due to lack of adequate health insurance coverage. The program is designed as a "clinic without walls" where patients can receive skilled care through physicians' private practices. Services covered may include lumpectomy, mastectomy, breast reconstruction, chemotherapy, radiation therapy as well as many of the support services required to maximize clinical outcome.

Gateway to Hope has taken root having secured an unprecedented level of donated medical supplies and professional services. What is amazing about Gateway to Hope is that the donations and services requested are so significant and the response from the community is incredibly positive. Recently, these efforts have helped a woman with no insurance at the time of her diagnosis, who worked as a waitress, secure comprehensive medical and surgical treatment.

Gateway to Hope's goal for 2006 is to arrange care for 25 low-income women with breast cancer. The program hopes to serve as a model for arranging donated comprehensive medical

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care so that it can be duplicated in other cities and states across the country to meet a critical need.

To access care through Gateway to Hope, patients can either self-refer or be referred by a friend, family member, or health-care provider. Patients accepted into the Gateway to Hope program are in overall good health and have a biopsy-confirmed diagnosis of breast cancer. Women initially undergo financial testing, a psychological evaluation and completion of a medical history in order to be deemed eligible for the program.

Many of us have been privileged to have the richness of life that our education and hard work have allowed us to enjoy. For many individuals this does not hold true and Gateway to Hope is a way to assist those with critical medical needs to access care. The St. Louis Metropolitan Medical Society members can be a partner in this endeavor by referring patients to this program and donating professional services and medical supplies to meet the needs of the patients Gateway to Hope plans to serve.

Dr. David Caplin is a plastic surgeon and SLMMS member.



How You Can Help

- Refer patients to the program
- Donate professional services
- Donate medical supplies

Information:

Gateway to Hope
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Suite 300

St. Louis, MO 63141

(314) 569-1113

www.gthstl.org

