

St. Clair Hospital delivers comprehensive care to popular coach diagnosed with cancer

After being diagnosed with rectal cancer last spring, one of the first phone calls that Kurt Wentzel, the 67-year-old assistant coach of the Mt. Lebanon Freshman Football team, made was to head Freshman coach, Jeff Donati, to let him know he would understand if he needed to resign.

“My greatest concern was missing so much football,” recalls Kurt who has coached football for 41 years, including 10 years at St. Anne’s in Castle Shannon, before joining the staff at Mt. Lebanon. “I knew I could possibly miss as much as six weeks because of the chemotherapy alone.”

Jeff says that Kurt called him to explain his treatments and surgery, and figured that he would have to miss some time during the season.

“Kurt is a great coach and wonderful for the kids, so we wanted to do everything we possibly could to keep him on board,” says Jeff. “He really enjoys coaching the kids. He’s a positive influence on them and the kids absolutely love him.”

Ultimately, Kurt decided to stay on and work through his treatments, which included six weeks of chemotherapy and radiation therapy, and then surgery, followed up with another four months of chemotherapy.

“All of the physicians involved in my care were very professional and friendly,” says Kurt. “Everything was explained in great detail to me and all of my questions were answered and my concerns addressed.”

Cancer patients at St. Clair are afforded the full continuum of care, without leaving the community. That was a big plus to Kurt.

“At first I thought I was going to have to go to a cancer center across town or somewhere, but then I learned that St. Clair Hospital has everything I needed to fight cancer right here,” Kurt says. “I underwent chemotherapy, radiation treatments, and the surgery. It was very convenient for me and it made things a little easier. Also, everyone from the physicians to the nurses and the support staff made this thing as pleasant as possible. They were wonderful. I don’t understand how they can remain so nice under trying circumstances.”



It was last May when Kurt, also an assistant Track & Field coach at Mt. Lebanon, noticed some blood in his stool, prompting him to schedule a colonoscopy. Five years earlier, Kurt had a polyp removed during a colonoscopy, which gave him some cause for concern. It was during the follow-up colonoscopy that Kurt’s gastroenterologist found a tumor in his rectum. When a biopsy revealed it to be cancerous, Kurt was referred to **Leigh Nadler, M.D.**, a colorectal surgeon at St. Clair Hospital.

“I was really disappointed and surprised when this was discovered,” recalls Kurt, a retired Social Studies teacher in the Chartiers Valley School District. “I had no history of cancer in my family that I knew of.”

Dr. Nadler says the tumor was in the lower part of the rectum, and extended to the upper rectum, so it was quite large.

“I performed rectal ultrasound, important for tumor staging, and identified enlarged lymph nodes indicating potential tumor spread,” he says. “Tumors in the rectum are initially treated with radiation and chemotherapy, prior to surgery. So fortunately, here at St. Clair, we have the UPMC/St. Clair Hospital Cancer Center with radiation oncology and a team of excellent medical oncologists.”

In addition to Dr. Nadler, Kurt also saw **Vincent E. Reyes, Jr., M.D.**, a medical oncologist at St. Clair. Dr. Reyes says that comprehensive care for the patient is critical to have a successful outcome because it takes coordination to make sure the patient is getting the right care and in a timely manner.

“Rectal cancer requires the coordination of this comprehensive care center because its treatment involves radiation oncology, medical oncology, and surgery,” he says. “Kurt’s case really exemplifies how you need coordination and cooperation between all these specialties.”

Prior to having surgery to remove the tumor, Dr. Reyes recommended Kurt have a full course of radiation, along with chemotherapy. The chemotherapy primarily involved a drug named Xeloda, which Kurt took in pill form.

“Kurt did great with those treatments and the tumor shrunk down to the point where it was almost gone,” says Dr. Reyes.



The purpose of radiation therapy — which was performed from June through August by **Robert Werner, M.D.**, a radiation oncologist at UPMC/St. Clair Hospital Cancer Center — is to reduce the size of a tumor, which, in turn, can help prevent the need for a permanent colostomy.

In mid-September, Dr. Nadler performed surgery to remove the tumor. This included preserving important nerves and creating a “J-pouch” out of the colon in order to improve post-operative function and continence with less urgency once the temporary ostomy was reversed. The colon pouch functions as a reservoir, similar to the rectum, he says.

“Kurt did very well following his operation. Fortunately, there was no tumor spread to any lymph nodes,” Dr. Nadler says. “There was still cancer in the rectal wall, but it was much smaller due to the radiation effects. He had no post-op complications and was discharged home in a few days. The plan from that point was post-op intravenous chemotherapy and then reverse the ileostomy to restore normal bowel function.”

Dr. Nadler agrees that treating rectal cancer takes a team approach — a combination of the medical oncologist, radiation oncologist, and surgeon.

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“Here at St. Clair all of these team members come together and meet once a week to discuss cancer cases,” he says. “Together, we can discuss these cases in a roundtable forum and determine the best treatment approach. With rectal cancer, it is important to determine who needs preoperative treatment with chemotherapy and radiation.

State-of-the-art imaging studies available at St. Clair, such as rectal ultrasound and PET/CT scanning, help us make that decision.”

Dr. Reyes concurs.

“St. Clair Hospital creates a personal, comprehensive plan where you have coordination of physicians at one site and where a plan can be made up of, and implemented among, the various specialties,” he says. “When you deal with radiation oncology, colorectal surgery, and medical oncology, it’s very complex and time sensitive.”

According to Dr. Reyes, what you need is active involvement from the physicians and support staff.

“Not only is this a comprehensive and state-of-the-art cancer center, but it also gives you a personal touch,” he says. “At St. Clair, we have one singular vision: to get the patient better.”

When you have an environment where you are not only getting great care from the doctors, but you also feel that you are not just a number, but an actual person, Dr. Reyes says, it really makes your treatment more tolerable, and it gets you through it a lot easier.

Kurt, in fact, said he used that support to bolster his own determination to view his treatment as an adventure, of sorts, something to be conquered, like climbing a mountain or completing a triathlon.

Only seven days after his surgery, and two days after his hospital discharge, Kurt was back on the field watching his football team practice. Jeff, the head coach, and the players were surprised, and thrilled, to see him.

“I know Kurt, and I know he’s tough, and he loves being around the kids, but that surgery was pretty extreme for him to come back,” says Jeff. “He originally said he was coming up to say hello to the kids, but he ended up staying the entire practice. The next day he did the same thing, and it turns out that he really didn’t miss much time at all.”

Jeff says the players couldn’t believe it when he came back that quickly.

“It was truly an amazing thing. It just doesn’t happen,” Jeff says. “What he did and overcame that quickly for the love of being around those kids and for the love of the game is incredible.”

While every cancer patient at St. Clair is unique, everybody gets the best care and the optimal treatment.

“What makes us able to do our job and gives me satisfaction is that not only do our patients get better, people feel like they are part of the family,” says Dr. Reyes. “My patients’ experiences are fantastic at St. Clair Hospital, and it comes down to the nurses, the case managers, everyone who is involved — they are the people who make the Hospital run. Kurt is wonderful and colorful, but his particular story is not unique because everyone with cancer receives the same type of personal care, warmth and empathy, and that is the essence of receiving comprehensive cancer care at St. Clair Hospital.”

Kurt, who underwent his last chemotherapy treatment on February 10, says he recalls a conversation he had with Dr. Reyes when the cancer was first discovered. “Dr. Reyes told me to remember that C is for Cancer, but it also is for Cured. And when I was finished with all of my treatments, I was going to be cured. That really helped me.” ■

For more information on comprehensive cancer care at St. Clair Hospital, and to see a video of Kurt Wentzel’s story, please visit www.stclair.org.

Complete Cancer Care at St. Clair Hospital

DIAGNOSIS

SURGERY

CHEMOTHERAPY

RADIATION

The St. Clair Hospital Cancer Care Center offers a multi-disciplinary approach that provides quality care and treatment for adult patients and their families in all stages of the cancer continuum — from early detection, to initial diagnosis, through treatment, to palliative care. This approach is designed to assure optimal outcomes, patient satisfaction, and quality of life.

St. Clair Hospital's Cancer Care Center is accredited as a Comprehensive Community Cancer Center with Commendation by the American College of Surgeons Commission on Cancer, the highest rating that can be achieved.

With St. Clair's highly skilled medical staff and partnership with UPMC Cancer Centers, patients are afforded many of the sophisticated services available at the highly regarded Hillman Cancer Center, without leaving the community. These services are available for patients with cancer of the breast, colon, esophagus, head & neck, liver, lung, pancreas, prostate, reproductive system, skin, and other organs.

Last July, St. Clair debuted our new Sipe Infusion Center for oncology patients receiving chemotherapy and other treatments. In January, the Hospital broke ground for an addition to the UPMC/St. Clair Hospital Cancer Center, a joint venture between St. Clair Hospital and UPMC Cancer Centers. When completed this summer, the addition will house a second linear accelerator, which will be used to provide cancer patients access to treatments such as image-guided radiation therapy, or IGRT, to help better deliver radiation therapy to cancerous tumors. Our board-certified surgeons provide expert care, using the latest surgical techniques and technology, including robotic-assisted surgery, to benefit patients.

St. Clair's focus on survivorship is demonstrated through our supportive services for cancer patients. In 2011, more than 1,000 oncology patients received rehabilitative services in the form of ostomy care, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy. ■



Kelly M. Smith, B.S.R.T. (R)(T), Operations Manager, Radiation Oncology, UPMC/St. Clair Hospital Cancer Center, with a linear accelerator used to deliver radiation to cancerous tumors.