

AMBULATORY CANCER CARE

Quicker expansion to bring more value and accessibility to patients



Cancer is said to be on rise and is one of the leading cause of deaths. With the increase in cases, the call to accommodate to the cancer patients needs and care rises as well. This article highlights the expansion of ambulatory care centres and how it benefits cancer patients.

Phoebe Ho, Chief Executive Officer, Integrated Oncology Centres (IOC).

The global cancer burden is raising an alarm for healthcare leaders worldwide. Cancer claimed 10 million lives in 2020¹. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) estimates that 1 in 5 people develop

¹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/cancer>

cancer in their lifetime and these new estimates suggest that more than 50 million people are living within five years of a past cancer diagnosis². With more new patients being diagnosed each year, the number of active cancer patients is increasing rapidly.

The rising population of cancer patients has presented a new set of challenges for all countries. Healthcare administrators have to speed up the establishment of health care facilities. Universities and colleges have to expand their training capabilities to train health care professionals, with the aim of catching up with the service capability and the ever-growing demand of cancer services.

In this context, integrated cancer care in an ambulatory setting can be a beacon of hope. Ambulatory cancer care, which is also known as cancer care given through outpatient settings, is well-recognised to be cost effective, deliver better clinical outcomes and has a relatively scalable model.

Over the course of the last decade and a half, ambulatory cancer care has seen tremendous growth due regulatory, legal, and economic reasons. Most importantly, studies show that to stay out of the hospital environment and in a smaller, more comforting and familiar setting is often linked with higher patient satisfaction.

Seeing this growing trend, this article seeks to share the benefits of ambulatory cancer care for patients.

Single specialty networks and ambulatory care centres can help fill the gap

With the rise of cancer cases worldwide, the need to support a growing population of cancer patients is frequently being discussed at various medical forums and roundtables. It is clear that there is a gap between the number of cancer facilities available in Asia versus the number of projected cancer patients.

² <https://www.uicc.org/news/globocan-2020-new-global-cancer-data>.

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PHOEBE is a pharmacist by training and has over 20 years of experience in healthcare. She also served in various senior executive positions with Fortune 500 pharmaceutical companies. Formerly Vice President & General Manager of GlaxoSmithKline Ltd, Phoebe was instrumental in establishing new businesses that covered vaccines and dermatology for GSK in China and Hong Kong.

However, establishing a hospital can be a daunting task and this is not just from a financial point of view. This has given rise to the birth of single specialty centres that provide ambulatory cancer

care which have successfully navigated the complexities of a large hospital set-up and yet bring together competent medical professionals to provide patients with the best-fitted facilities, quality

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treatments, diagnostics and advanced technology. Single specialty cancer centres as such are also less capital-intensive compared to traditional multi-specialty healthcare, making them more scalable and faster to set up.

One such example in the Asia-Pacific region would be Integrated Oncology Centres (IOC) which is led by CEO, Ms Phoebe Ho and her team of healthcare professionals. In Asia, there is still a limited number of centres providing ambulatory care and this clear shortage of the available number of facilities led the organisation to believe that they needed to roll out more treatment centres at a quicker rate to keep up with demand of ambulatory cancer care.

Besides providing ambulatory cancer care, IOC's approach provides doctors the opportunity to be partners in managing these centres, thus providing them with the chance to have greater involvement in management and administrative functions. With the expertise of the doctors, clinical workflow can be designed in the most efficient way. This model enables the doctors to serve the patients in a more direct and effective way and the process is leaner with the whole centre serving patients with the same disease. This appeal has enabled many more cancer

centres to be rolled out quicker than other networks with the geographically advantage by engaging local doctors.

Access to multiple specialisations

A recent article published in the Journal of Healthcare Contracting showed that 80% of the cancer care can now be delivered in an outpatient setting³. With the advances in the technology in drug treatment, for example oral targeted therapy, cancer treatment has become more sophisticated. Inpatient admissions are no longer necessary for most of the clinical situations.

In the past, a cancer patient would have to admit themselves to a hospital to receive cancer treatment which would most likely lead them to missing out of valuable family time while staying on an inpatient bed. When a cancer patient is diagnosed with cancer, their loved ones mean the most to them for support and for them to make the most out of their lives.

However, ambulatory care centres of today have evolved and thankfully, medical professionals can provide a very broad range of treatments to patients ranging from tomotherapy, immunotherapy to targeted therapy and chemotherapy without them being in an inpatient setting. The rapid advancement of ambulatory cancer care has seen a surge in a variety of specialty treatment modalities, from palliative clinics, physiotherapy to survivorship programmes. Most ambulatory cancer centres now also provide ancillary patient services, from nutritional guidance to psychological services and even financial counselling for some cases.

Providing the best possible care to cancer patients is most important for medical professionals. With ambulatory cancer centres, medical professionals and doctors work as a team to ensure smooth service delivery as well as effective communication for clinical decisions. With medical care professionals making

³ <https://www.jhconline.com/cancer-care-migrates-to-outpatient-setting-2.html>

most decisions in an ambulatory care centre, there is more ownership, accountability and overall better decision in cancer care. Ultimately, a cost-effective cancer centre can be built to serve cancer patients in the best way.

Faster turnaround

Ambulatory care centres are also free from lengthy inpatient care pathways. When it comes to patient care, experienced doctors in ambulatory care centres can make clinical decisions swiftly and make arrangement immediately with the facilities set up around their practice, thus helping patients to save time and hassle. Ambulatory cancer care allows patients to have direct access quickly to a team of doctors and medical professionals without hospitalisation.

According to Voice Ons (2019), ambulatory cancer care provides cancer patients with a better quality of life. In ambulatory care, patients limit their time in the health care facilities to active treatment time⁴. Contrast to inpatient admissions, patients do not have to queue up at the admission office, receive their treatment on a hospital bed for a couple of days and have their meals in the wards. They can instead spend the rest of their time with their loved ones, have dinner at home and sleep on their own beds. Some patients might even be able to continue to work in the office. These routines might seem like trivial requests, but they mean a lot to cancer patients.

As a result, patients can quickly get their treatments and go back to their loved ones to enjoy their quality time with them instead of going through long administrative procedures. In addition to that, the dynamic culture and flat structure of such ambulatory cancer care networks means faster turnarounds and quicker roll outs of new services to patients. This then translates into timely and accessible care for patients as the main focus of ambulatory cancer

⁴ <https://voice.ons.org/news-and-views/the-vital-role-of-oncology-nursing-in-ambulatory-care>

care centres is the wellbeing of cancer patients.

Enhanced psychological well-being of patients

When cancer patients first learn that they have been diagnosed with cancer, a lot goes through their minds as they have many questions and most of the time they are worried of what their future holds. Most of the time, the cancer diagnosis on a patient can take both a mental and physical toll on the patients and their loved ones.

The journey taken by cancer patients can be long, daunting, and arduous. Understanding the psychological burden of cancer patients and their care gives takes years of experience in oncology. The ability to provide a solution to this particular patient need takes a team with a clear focus. With the help of doctors, nurses and medical social workers specialised in cancer care, the psychological issues can be of the patient can be resolved.

Patients are already undergoing a great degree of stress and suffering and the aim of these ambulatory cancer centres is to lessen as much of their burdens as possible by putting emphasis on giving cancer patients the treatment they need through a faster and more convenient channel. Besides, Ambulatory cancer care centres have had a positive impact on cancer patient as a study published in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health mentioned that breast cancer patients who receive ambulatory care are less likely to experience negative health effects, like hospitalisation and emergency department visits⁵.

Cost benefits for patients

Focusing on one key specialty such as cancer is a key differentiator for ambulatory cancer care centres. By focusing on key treatments and

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6747467/>

developing talent that are specific to cancer, the centre's resources are very customised and specific to one particular specialty. As a result, this contributes to cost effective operations for the healthcare provider with a key focus on maximising value for cancer patients and improving efficiency.

For the patient, the advantage of ambulatory cancer care means that they need not spend extra costs for hospitalisation. Patients can receive their treatment and often go home that same day. Besides experiencing the comfort of receiving treatment in a safe and familiar setting, ambulatory cancer care can also translate to real and measurable cost savings.

In conclusion, more ambulatory cancer care centres ought to be set up. Patients should be surrounded by a supportive environment with a team of professionals knowing their needs deeply. They should walk their cancer journeys with the healing hands and caring hearts, eventually to the way of recovery.