



UCSF Department of Medicine ZUCKERBERG SAN FRANCISCO GENERAL

GUIDING THE WAY TO BETTER HEALTH: ZSFG PATIENT NAVIGATION

Under the best of circumstances, it can be difficult for patients to find their way through the complex health care system – but many can fall through the cracks if they struggle with additional challenges, such as poverty, limited English proficiency, or social isolation. Patient navigators help remedy this dilemma, providing practical resources and a reassuring presence to patients throughout their journey. ZSFG has several outstanding patient navigation programs, each tailored to meeting patients where they are in their lives.

Charting a New Course, Together

Nearly half of ZSFG patients have a substance use disorder, and a hospitalization may help inspire patients to make a change if they have enough support. The Addiction Care Team (ACT), founded in 2019 by Marlene Martin, MD, Associate Professor in the ZSFG Division of Hospital Medicine, strives to provide that support through medical care, addiction treatment, and community resources.

A key part of the ACT are patient navigators - two based in the Emergency Department, and two in



Laurel Puffert

inpatient units. “We work to understand whether patients want to maintain, reduce, or stop their substance use,” said Laurel Puffert, Inpatient Patient Navigator. “The patient is the guide, and I just connect them to resources to help them meet their goal.”

Navigators use motivational interviewing to discover what is important to patients, asking open questions, using affirmations, reflecting what a patient says, and summarizing. “The patient should be talking much more than me,” said Ms. Puffert. “I try to understand what benefits they get from

substance use, as well as the negative health outcomes. Often it’s a way to cope with traumatic events or isolation.”

“If the patient feels like the negative outweighs the positive, I may ask, ‘What would it look like for you to make a change?’” said Ms. Puffert. Depending on their goals, she may refer them to methadone clinics, Alcoholics Anonymous and other community-based groups, or harm reduction resources that offer individual counseling. “Some people like groups, whereas others only want to talk to one other person,” she said. “I try to ask thoughtful questions, offer a variety of things, and see what sounds interesting to them.”

She can also arrange for an intake worker outside ZSFG to meet with the patient at the bedside and accompany a newly discharged patient in a taxi to a residential treatment program. In 2020, ACT saw 1,464 patients, and discharged 58 people directly to residential treatment.

She values working as part of the ACT team, which includes physicians, nurses, licensed vocational nurses, and colleagues across ZSFG. “Having our wraparound team is not something you see in a lot of places,” said Ms. Puffert. “Together we have such a wealth of resources and knowledge. I also appreciate that San Francisco General values harm reduction and gives out supplies such as fentanyl test strips or clean needles at discharge. We’re willing to engage and be progressive.”



ACT navigators Mitch Aman (3rd from L); Louise Stephan (2nd from R), and Rachel Perera (far right) with (L to R) Scott Steiger, MD; Martha Castellanos-Perez; Ali Haas; DPH Director Grant Colfax, MD; Elizabeth Abbs, MD; Nicole Tantoco, MD; Marlene Martin, MD

Ms. Puffert said a majority of patients are interested in engaging in some way, though that might not always mean getting sober. “Each of the little steps in the stages of change is valuable, and each moment of open dialogue is a little success,” she said. “Even if they leave and consume the same amount, they have some tools and know where to go if they want to make a change.”

A Holistic Approach

ZSFG cancer patients see up to 16 different providers, including a medical oncologist, surgeon, radiation oncologist, chemotherapy nurse, and physician assistant. “The navigator is the one person who goes through the whole continuum of care with them,” said Barbara Cicerelli, MPA, Director of the Cancer Navigation Program. “If they have any questions, they can just call us. We know who to call to get them answers.” The Cancer Navigation Program started about 20 years ago, focusing on breast and cervical cancer patients. In 2016, the program expanded to accept referrals for patients with other types of cancer who have significant barrier to receiving

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treatment, such as lack of social support, marginal housing, or mental health issues. The team includes up to five navigators, who speak Spanish, Chinese, and/or English, and serves about 400 patients annually. Understanding the culture of the communities the navigators serve is essential.



Barbara Cicerelli, MPA, with (left to right) Liz Castillo, Nadia Navarro, Yadira Rodriguez, Huiyu (Julie) Xie

The program is tailored to each patient's needs. If hospital schedulers have difficulty reaching a patient, navigators call multiple times until able to confirm the next appointment date. Patients receive all radiation-related care at UCSF, where additional wayfinding is helpful. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, navigators met patients in the lobby, or even picked them up in a taxi. Navigators elicit patients' biggest concerns, letting providers know so they can address these during the appointment. If a patient looks confused after a clinic encounter, navigators can ask the provider to explain information a different way.

Navigators also help patients prepare for surgical procedures. "We explain that they can't even have a cup of coffee," said Ms. Cicerelli. "This helps prevent surgeries from getting cancelled." If a chemotherapy patient experiences side effects such as weakness, navigators can get a chemotherapy nurse on the phone to determine if the patient needs care in the clinic or evaluation in Urgent Care or the Emergency Department.

If a patient has missed multiple appointments and appears in the Urgent Care Clinic, navigators receive an alert and can often facilitate a drop-in appointment with an oncology team member. "The General is a unique place to work, because our providers really understand our population," said Ms. Cicerelli. "We probably won't get some patients in for a follow-up appointment, so we do what we can right then to establish a connection."

The team helps with social needs beyond medical care, such as helping patients obtain disability, unemployment, or rental assistance. They also provide emotional support. "Patients sometimes don't want to burden loved ones, but they often feel comfortable addressing their fears with the navigation team, asking 'What's in store for me?'" said Ms. Cicerelli. "It's an honor for us to assist patients during one of the most vulnerable stages of their lives. We can't take away their cancer, but we can take away some of their worries."

Supporting a Desire to Change

The ZSFG Diabetes Prevention Program (DPP) helps prediabetic patients avoid developing Type 2 diabetes. The yearlong program includes 25 one-hour group sessions with a health coach about topics such as nutrition, exercise, and stress management. The time commitment is substantial but worthwhile, and many participants can delay or prevent diabetes altogether.

Although many ZSFG patients are prediabetic, it was initially challenging to enroll patients in the program. "We had a bunch of flyers, but nobody was calling," said Rebeca Garcia, MPH, a patient navigator with the Diabetes Prevention Program since 2018. She visits clinics in the San Francisco Health Network, apprising primary care teams how the program could help their patients.



Rebeca Garcia, MPH

Ms. Garcia calls referred patients to explain what the program is, gauge their interest, and answer questions. She tells them the program is free, comes with a yearlong gym membership, and is most effective with consistent attendance. She asks questions to discover what the patient wants and any obstacles to participating. "It's about getting to know where each individual is," she said. "Does the patient really want to make a change?"

She checks in with enrolled patients several times during the yearlong program. "I've had so many participants cry, especially with their fears and frustrations around the pandemic," said Ms. Garcia. "I reflect what they've said, like 'Am I hearing this right, that you're having a hard time?' and ask

them what parts they do have control over, like making lifestyle changes to improve their health."

In 2020, Ms. Garcia reached nearly three-quarters of referred patients, and half of referred patients signed up for the DPP. Even with the challenges of switching to a Zoom format because of the pandemic, the program has been effective: 62 percent of the cohort which began in spring 2020 lost between 3 and 8 percent of their body weight.

"Speaking Spanish and being from the community opens up a whole different conversation," said Ms. Garcia, who is bilingual. When one patient confided that he was unable to read, she encouraged him to let his doctor know. "I told him that as health care providers, we serve the patients, and this feedback helps the doctor help him," she said.

Ms. Garcia appreciates being part of a team. "Those 10 or 20 minutes that a doctor has with a patient is good, but we can support that with open discussion about how patients can improve their individual health," she said. She also lets physicians know whether patients they referred ended up enrolling in the program or not, and hopes to encourage future referrals.

"I try to guide patients through the health care system and help them overcome barriers," she said. "We're there with patients 100 percent of the way."

Elizabeth Chur

Editors: Neil Powe, Laurae Pearson, Brooks Bigart

SPOTLIGHT

PRISE Center Launched and Faculty Honors

UCSF launched the [PRISE](#) (Partnerships in Research in Implementation Science for Equity) Center, co-directed by **Adithya Cattamanchi, MD, MAS**, Division of Pulmonary and Critical Care, and Margaret Handley, PhD, MPH. The Center, which is a joint initiative of the Departments of Medicine and Epidemiology and Biostatistics, was created to put science into practice at ZSFG and SFDPH.

Alicia Fernandez, MD, Division of General Internal Medicine, was selected to receive the 2021 Dr. Thomas N. Burbridge Award for Public Service in the faculty category.

Urmimala Sarkar, MD, Division of General Internal Medicine, was selected as recipient of the SGIM 2021 Mid-Career Research Mentorship Award.

Margot Kushel, MD, Division of Center for Vulnerable Populations, was named Woman of the Year for District 9 by California state senator Nancy Skinner.

Diane Havlir, MD, Division of HIV, Infectious Diseases, and Global Medicine, was named Woman of the Year for District 19 by California assembly member Phil Ting.

Carina Marquez, MD, Division of HIV, Infectious Diseases, and Global Medicine, received a certificate of honor for her work with Ward 86 from Mayor London Breed.