

Barton rethinks offering suite of oncology services

By Kathryn Reed

It would be hard to find someone on the South Shore whose life has not been touched by cancer.

Treatment, though, has usually required patients to travel to at least Carson City or Truckee; often farther depending on the type of cancer and one's financial means.

Barton Health wanted to be a bigger player in helping care for cancer patients, so the oncology department came into being in January. But those desires have been dramatically scaled back. This means people are back to having to leave the basin for most of their cancer care.

"I was disappointed to learn Barton was closing the oncology department. I can still keep the same doctor and go to Truckee or sometimes have a teleconference through Barton," a South Shore man told *Lake Tahoe News*. He is no longer in the treatment phase, so it's easier to travel just for follow-up visits.

The original plan was for Barton to partner with doctors Laurence Heifetz and Thomas Semrad of Sierra Nevada Oncology, which is tied to Tahoe Forest Hospital in Truckee. Patients are still referred to them and can be consulted via telemedicine.

At the same time Barton was working with UC Davis Health to be part of the statewide Cancer Care Network. This is still in place. This allows Barton patients access to virtual tumor boards and clinical trials.

"We assessed Barton oncology after the first four months of

operations and recognized additional considerations were needed for the service line to be sustainable. This includes researching the requirements and regulations for expanding our current pharmacy to offer chemotherapy,” Clint Purvance, CEO and president of Barton Health, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “We are continuing to explore options to expand oncology services in the future, including a focus on developing a comprehensive cancer wellness program supporting patients and their families. The goal is to offer expanded oncology services in the future through a sustainable model.”

Purvance told *LTM* that economics is not the reason for the change in local oncology services.

“Given the uncertainty of the Affordable Care Act and federal program reimbursement, we are paying close attention to the national health care landscape and will assess our programs and resources as appropriate,” he said.

In May, Purvance sent a letter to staff explaining the oncology changes.

For now, patients have access to family nurse practitioner Janet Goodall. She helps coordinate care for local residents who have been diagnosed with cancer. This includes helping schedule telemedicine visits, radiographic tests, lab work, diagnostics, and infusions.

Barton’s cancer wellness program is designed to help patients in non-medical ways through exercise, yoga and nutrition. The Barton Foundation helps fund it.

“Expansion of the program will be phased in over the next year and we are looking at services that include meeting with a navigator to understand the support services available, including financial, transportation, and psychological, to name a few,” Purvance said.

The wellness program is free for oncology patients. Once the

Robert Maloff Center of Excellence opens there will be more room for the oncology wellness program.