

Getting treatments closer to home is a blessing for many

Tom Tufts, 43, of Frankfort, suffers from fabrys, a rare disease involving a missing enzyme and requiring medication that is given intravenously. Tufts used to travel to the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, every two weeks to receive his four-hour treatment. He would drive to Portland, fly to Dulles Airport, take a taxi to a hotel to spend the night, take a shuttle bus to NIH to have his treatment, and then take a shuttle bus back to the airport, fly to Portland and then drive the two hours home. And that's if the weather was good. In bad weather he often found himself taking a shuttle bus from Logan Airport in Boston to Portland. Tufts made that trip 26 times a year for a year and a half.

Now he just has to make a 20-minute drive to Waldo County General Hospital. "It was my bad luck to be born with this but it's good luck that I can do it here now," says Tufts. "It is so, so much easier and better." He says during the four-hour treatment, he is in a private room and watches television and is given snacks.

The number of patient visits at Waldo County General Hospital's Oncology and Infusion Therapy Department has grown by leaps and bounds, from three when it opened in 1987 to 626 in 1995 to 2,657 this year. Total patient hours have increased from 577.5 in 1995 to 3,227.15 this year.

That means many individuals have been able to get their chemotherapy and other treatments and transfusions locally.

Tufts says there are people who see him enter the clinic located in the hospital and jump to the conclusion that he has cancer. But during 2007, the department administered more than 600 non-oncology treatments and transfusions, including iron supplements and medications for multiple sclerosis and colon disorders.

Still the primary focus of the department is cancer treatments.

Oncologist Dr. Woondong Jeong from MaineGeneral Medical Center in Augusta serves as the medical consultant for the cancer patients. He is onsite Wednesdays to meet with cancer patients and recommend care.

The department is staffed Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. by four registered nurses. They provide chemotherapy and a number of other cancer treatments. But even more than the treatments themselves, the nurses in the oncology department provide a reassuring, homey setting. Patients receive their treatments in one of four private rooms that have lots of little extras including art on the walls and a peaceful sky scene in place of one of the clear covers over the lights. In the waiting room, there are lots of green plants and comfortable furniture. And the nurses are also always available to answer patients' questions and help them through the process.

The head of the department, Sue Drinkwater, RN, received her Oncology Nursing certification some 12 years ago and has maintained that status ever since. She has been a registered nurse at the hospital since 1976 working in many difference patient areas but she enjoys most the Oncology and Infusion Therapy department, where she has worked since 1991. "It is a very rewarding area because we focus on helping patients and their families get through treatments they have chosen to undertake, supporting them when they decide to stop treatments, celebrating successes and keeping in contact with survivors," she says.

For more information about the oncology and infusion department, call 930-2555.