

# Getting the best cancer treatment

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It's hard not to notice that cancer is big business these days. With the numbers of people being diagnosed and increasingly knowledgeable patients, it was only a matter of time before the inevitable advertising would appear from some of the elite national cancer centers touting their ability to keep you alive – or in some other way give you better treatment than anyone else.

The growing number of ads finally caught the attention of the media, and in December *The New York Times* ran a front-page story on advertising by nonprofit cancer centers, who, it seems, are not controlled by the same rules and regulations that affect medical devices, drugs or other cancer related material.

The ads detailed in the Times piece show how a little bit of truth can present a distorted picture of fact.

I also found myself having a few mixed reactions to the story since I have always felt that cancer needs as much ink as it can get. It's an "even bad publicity is good for cancer" attitude because it raises the visibility of the disease. Then I get in an argument with myself. On the one hand, people reading these ads probably don't have cancer, and the positive is that if they are diagnosed, they may remember in the back of their mind that they saw some hospital's advertisement for how well they treat that cancer. This should result in a feeling that they should research where they want to be treated. On the other hand, will Joe Public think that the only way he will get good cancer treatment is to go to their center, no matter how far it is from home. Not true.

Just the weekend before the story ran, I was talking to a local journalist about cancer, and he asked me if I would recommend to a newly diagnosed person that they do not pass go and take off immediately for one of the top cancer centers in the country. I said it depended; I needed more information. I know that a cancer diagnosis can be easy or hard. Does the person have an often seen, run of the mill (if there is such a thing) cancer, or is it rare? Is it a straightforward pathology or is everyone arguing? I already wrote a blog about oncologists at the San Antonio Breast Cancer Symposium disagreeing about how to treat metastatic cancers. This is because metastasis is complicated and each case is unique. Treatment for many cancers requires the art of the practitioner as well as the science behind the drugs. In these cases, you bet I would recommend the person find the expert in that particular field. There is even some research that shows some cancers have better outcomes if the patient goes to a major cancer center.

What has to be weighed here is traveling far from home for treatment. It's a choice many have to make to begin with because they are in rural areas or areas not served by a comprehensive cancer center. But if you are in a city like Dallas, where we have more than one comprehensive cancer center, the treatment you will receive for one of the usual cancer diagnoses will probably be the same you would get from any cancer center. Cancer is exhausting and traveling for treatment adds

cost and stress to an already unbearable time.

The *Times* writer added a sidebar that irked me more than the main article. The headline was *Factors to Weigh in Deciding Where to Get Care* and it recommended that in choosing a doctor patients look for a good fit, credentials, and someone with the human touch as the most important things to consider. It's great to have a sensitive oncologist, but if I have a rare cancer with small positive outcomes, I want the most educated, specialized, and egotistical guy in the country who hates to fail working for me.

Bottom line. If you are diagnosed with cancer, research the options. Look into it. There are a number of things that mark a good cancer treatment center from one that may not give you all that is available. Do they offer clinical trials? If you can see from the doctor you are talking to that he or she has never seen your kind of cancer, find the doctor who has, no matter how far you have to travel. And, as with all advertising, look at cancer ads with a grain of salt and just hope you will never be a consumer of this particular product.