

Making Connections

**Helping Patients
Find the Right
Treatments
One Call at a Time**

Since 2000, Lorena Iniguez has been the voice of UCLA's Jonsson Cancer Center's clinical trials referral service. Before she joined the cancer center, there was no centralized location for patients to call for up-to-date information about ongoing cancer studies. Iniguez helped establish the referral service from the ground up.

Every day, she takes calls from patients, doctors and family members looking for information about the more than 200 leading-edge clinical trials available at the cancer center. Most of the callers have questions about colon, breast, lung, ovarian or prostate cancers.

"When patients call, I first attempt to evaluate their treatment history to make sure they qualify for a clinical trial before referring them to a study coordinator," Iniguez said. "Usually I call a patient within four to six weeks to follow up on their clinical trial referral process."

A clinical trial is a study conducted with cancer patients, usually to evaluate a new treatment. Each study is designed to answer vital scientific questions in an effort to find new and better ways to help cancer patients. During a trial, more and more information is gained about a new treatment, its risks and how well it may or may not work.

The referral service receives an average of 15 calls per day, Iniguez said. She does a lot more than just answer the phone—Iniguez helps patients navigate the system and find the care they need.

Iniguez recently received a call from a woman whose mother, a Kaiser Permanente patient, had undergone four separate chemotherapy regimens for advanced colorectal cancer that had spread to the liver and lungs.

"Her scans revealed disease progression," Iniguez said. "The daughter heard of a study with Dr. J. Randolph Hecht. At that time, the study was within two weeks of closing and only a couple of slots were left."

In order to obtain authorization to allow her mother to come to UCLA, the woman set up a review hearing with Kaiser.

"I suggested she set up an appointment with Dr. Hecht as soon as possible rather than waiting until after the review hearing as it would save time," Iniguez said. "I referred her to the new patient liaison who continued to work with her throughout the process."



The daughter has since contacted Iniguez to thank her for her help. When the media report new information about cancer studies, calls to the referral service often increase.

"Media broadcasts of new and exciting cancer studies at UCLA usually result in an overwhelming number of phone calls. This was the case when the leukemia pill Gleevec was approved. Considering the service had just started, I doubted I would be able to keep up the hectic pace," Iniguez said.

Iniguez has learned a lot about cancer since first starting the referral service and usually knows the right place to send a caller even if the question is obscure. Her background had prepared her for dealing with cancer patients. Before coming to UCLA, Iniguez worked at the National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service in Los Angeles. She also graduated from UCLA with a degree in sociology.

"It can be frustrating and emotionally wrenching to speak with desperate callers. They don't want to hang up," she said. "At times I feel I can help a patient best simply by listening. My greatest satisfaction is when I am able to instill hope in callers that have been previously told there is nothing more that can be done for their condition." ★

For more information on cancer clinical trials, call the Jonsson Cancer Center hotline at 888-798-0719 or visit our website at www.cancer.mednet.ucla.edu.