



## Navigating Breast Cancer

### **Patients Find Personal Support and Encouragement in the New Nurse Navigator of the Harbin Clinic's Breast Cancer Care Program.**

Almost everyone is aware of breast cancer, and most of us know a woman who has had the disease. Nonetheless, no amount of mainstream information can prepare a woman for the shock of finding a lump in her own breast—it is the beginning of an emotional roller coaster, riding on a seemingly endless sea of questions. What are the best tests for diagnosing breast cancer? Are there treatments that will cure me? How will treatment make me look and feel? How will I find all of the answers? How am I supposed to cope with all of this?

Women in the Coosa Valley region are finding answers and coordinated, multidisciplinary care at the Harbin Clinic, which has implemented a comprehensive program for the care of breast cancer patients. And the key to the program's success is Ann Hook, the nurse navigator who ensures that each breast cancer patient receives personal assistance in managing their illness, from the time of diagnosis through follow-up care.

Hook is a registered nurse with more than 20 years of experience in women's health, a certified cancer care nurse navigator and two-time breast cancer survivor who is dedicated to creating a supportive environment where patients are guided through their entire cancer journey. As a member of the Harbin Clinic's multidisciplinary team of health care professionals, including surgeons, radiologists and oncologists, Hook attends meetings regularly with physicians to discuss the patients she is supporting and coordinate their care.

"Our program is intended to provide consistency in care," says Dr. Paul Brock, a general surgeon at the Harbin Clinic. "My goal is for any breast cancer patient who sees a physician in Rome to get the exact same treatment she would get if she went to M.D. Anderson, the University of Alabama or Emory. The breast cancer care plan we have in place here is a very rigid protocol that has been set in place in cancer centers across the country. We want every breast cancer patient that enters physician care at point A to get to point Z in the exact same way."

Hook, who began her role at the Harbin Clinic in December, is developing a system where she can find patients during the time that they are undergoing diagnostic tests for breast cancer. She is notified by doctors or staff both within and outside of the Harbin Clinic when a patient is notified of a breast cancer diagnosis. Once a diagnosis is received, Hook's services are offered to the patient. If desired, Hook then contacts the patient to offer support to both the patient and her family.

However, while Hook is trying to become engaged with patients as early as possible, she is quick to point out that she is available to patients at any stage. "There may be people six months into treatment, who received a diagnosis a year ago, or breast cancer survivors who were diagnosed 10 years ago—any of these people may feel like they need to talk to somebody. I'm here for everyone."

Inside the Harbin Clinic, Hook keeps a reading room that is completely dedicated to breast cancer. "For patient privacy, the clinic provides a small room where patients can come talk to me or search through the resources I've been collecting over the years." Patients and their families can also check out books and take them home to read and absorb.

"Breast cancer brings on such emotional turmoil," Brock says. "The fear that a diagnosis of breast cancer instills in a woman's heart is so intense, and I think it's our job to try to dispel some of those fears."

Hook agrees. When she meets with patients for the first time, she says, she tries to empower them by providing a folder that includes information regarding Internet resources, a handout on stress management, booklets from the American Cancer Society and a healing journal so patients can write down what they are feeling. She then follows each patient through important dates, making herself available during important events such as the first chemotherapy treatment or the first surgery.

"I visit patients where they are receiving treatment and follow up with phone calls. And I'm finding that after a while, patients start to call me—a relationship has formed, and this lets me know that I'm doing my job well," says Hook. "I'm very grateful and blessed to be doing this now—this is my job and what I love to do. What I do here truly comes from my heart."

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*For more information about Harbin Clinic visit [www.harbinclinic.com](http://www.harbinclinic.com) or call 706-378-8131.*