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Family STAR Project TIPS and STRATEGIES:

Understanding the Health Care System

Going into a hospital, doctor's office, or talking to a health insurance company can be scary and stressful. The people may seem to speak a different language, everyone may seem rushed, and you and the patient may feel overwhelmed. This is normal. It takes time to get to know your doctor and feel comfortable with him or her. It also takes time to get to know how the health care system works. The patient is an important partner in his/her own health care, and so is the caregiver. You have a right to be treated with respect. Each health expert who sees the patient should listen to your concerns and spend enough time with you to answer your questions.

As you probably already know, not all health professionals are skilled in talking with patients and families. Many forget that the terms, procedures, and machines that they use every day are new and possibly frightening to others.

Don't be afraid to ask questions, and don't give up until you get and understand the answer.

Health Professionals:

Don't be afraid to ask the people caring for you what their role is in your care, what kind of training they've had, and what part of your care or treatment they'll be providing. This explanation of medical titles can tell you more about some of the health care professionals you may meet:

Anesthesiologist (AN-es-THEE-zee-AHL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in giving drugs or other agents (like gasses) that cause a total loss of feeling or relieve pain, most often during surgery. The drugs may put the patient into a deep sleep so they not aware of procedures or surgery.

Case manager: The member of the care team who coordinates the patient's care throughout diagnosis, treatment, and recovery; often a nurse or cancer nurse specialist. The goal of case management is that one person directs or oversees the patient's care. For example, a case manager may help the patient get through the complexities of the health care system by working with the health insurance company,

getting quicker answers to important questions, managing crises, and connecting the patient and family to needed resources.

Chaplain: A member of the clergy who attends to the spiritual needs of the patient and family. Often a chaplain is trained to care for people of many denominations, faiths, and beliefs.

Dermatologist (DER-muh-TAHL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of skin diseases. A *dermatological oncologist* has specialized training in diagnosing and treating skin cancers.

Dietitian (DIE-uh-TISH-un) or **Registered Dietitian (RD)**: An expert in the area of nutrition, food, and diet who has at least a Bachelor's Degree and has passed a national board exam. Many RDs specialize in areas like weight management, exercise science, cancer care, or cardiac rehabilitation. See also **Nutritionist**.

Discharge Coordinator: Often a nurse or **social worker** who helps make sure that patients leaving the hospital have what they need to continue their recovery at home, or may help a patient find other places to go after leaving the hospital, such as a nursing home or rehab, where they can continue to get the care they need.

Doctor of Osteopathic (OS-tee-uh-PATH-ick) Medicine (DO): A doctor with a licensing and educational background much like that of a Medical Doctor (MD). They tend to be primary care physicians and are specially trained to use a "whole person" approach to medicine rather than just treating specific symptoms. See also **Primary Care Physician**.

Dosimetrist (doe-SIM-uh-trist): A person with special training and certification who calculates and plans the correct radiation dose (the amount, rate, and how the dose is spread out) for cancer treatment and/or other diseases that require radiation treatment.

Endocrinologist (EN-duh-kruh-NAHL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in diseases related to the glands of the endocrine system, such as the thyroid, pituitary, pancreas, pineal, and adrenal glands.

Enterostomal Therapist (EN-ter-o-STO-mal THER-uh-pist): A health professional, often a nurse, who has been trained in an accredited program in enterostomal therapy to teach people how to care for ostomies (surgically created openings such as a colostomy or urostomy) and wounds. They are also called an *ostomy nurse* or a *wound care nurse*.

Gastroenterologist (GAS-tro-EN-ter-AHL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in diseases of the digestive (gastrointestinal or GI) tract.

Genetic (juh-NET-ick) Counselor: A specially trained health professional who:

- Helps people decide whether to have genetic testing done
- Helps people understand the risk of a genetic disorder within a family
- Provides information about the options available depending on the results of genetic testing
- Helps the patient consider the screening and preventive measures that are best based on the test results

Gynecologic Oncologist (GUY-nuh-kuh-LA-jik on-KAHL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in cancers of the female sex (reproductive) organs.

Gynecologist (GUY-nuh-KAHL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in female health issues, including sexual and reproductive function and the diseases of their reproductive organs, except diseases of the breast that require surgery.

Hematologist (HE-muh-TAHL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in diseases of the blood and blood-forming tissues.

Home Health Nurse: A nurse who provides care in the patient's home, including giving medicines and certain treatments; teaches patients and families about their care; and checks on the patient to see if medical care is needed.

Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) or Licensed Vocational Nurse (LVN): A nurse who has completed a year or so of technical health training, and passed a licensing test. This nurse can give medicines, help patients with physical hygiene and care, and perform many other health care-related tasks.

Medical Oncologist (on-KAHL-uh-jist): a doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating cancer with chemotherapy and other drugs. A medical oncologist is different from a *surgical oncologist*, who mostly treats cancer with surgery.

Neonatologist (NEE-o-nay-TAHL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in the care of newborn babies (until about 6 weeks of age, but often longer for babies who were born prematurely).

Nephrologist (neh-FRAHL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in kidney diseases.

Neurosurgeon (NUR-o-SUR-jun): A doctor who specializes in operations to treat problems involving the brain, spinal cord, or nerves.

Nurse Practitioner (nurs prak-TIH-shun-er): A registered nurse with a Master's or Doctoral Degree and special certification who has advanced training and clinical experience in a certain area of medical and nursing practice. Licensed and certified nurse practitioners diagnose and manage illness and disease, usually working closely with a doctor.

Nutritionist (noo-TRIH-shun-ist): A term used sometimes interchangeably with Dietitian, but educational requirements for nutritionists vary by state. Programs to certify nutritionists now exist, but requirements vary. See also **dietitian**.

Occupational -Therapist (OT): A licensed and specially trained therapist who works with people who have impairments or limitations to help them develop, recover, and improve the skills needed for daily living and working. They also work to prevent disability and maintain health. The practice of occupational therapy includes evaluation, treatment, and consultation.

Oncologist (on-KAHL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating cancer.

Oncology Clinical Nurse Specialist (on-KAHL-o-jee KLIN-ih-kull nurs SPESH-uh-list) (**CNS**): A registered nurse with a Master's Degree and advanced clinical practice in oncology nursing who specializes in the care of cancer patients. Oncology CNS's have many different roles depending on the setting. They may give direct patient or family care; supervise staff caring for patients and families; do nursing research related to cancer patients; or teach patients, families, and staff about cancer, treatment, and side effects.

Oncology (on-KAHL-o-jee) **Social Worker:** A person with a Master's Degree in social work who is an expert in coordinating and providing help with the social and emotional needs of the cancer patient and family. The oncology social worker may do counseling, help patients and families manage financial problems, work on housing or child care issues (such as when treatments are given at a facility away from home), and help people cope with different types of emotional distress.

Ophthalmologist (OFF-thuhl-MAHL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in eye diseases.

Oral and Maxillofacial (MAX-ill-o-FAY-shul) **Surgeon:** A surgeon who specializes in surgery of the mouth, jaw, and face.

Orthopedic (or-thuh-PEE-dik) **Surgeon:** A surgeon who specializes in diseases and injuries of the muscles, joint, and bones (the musculoskeletal system).

Otolaryngologist (O-toe-LAIR-in-GOL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in diseases and injuries of the ear, nose, and throat. Also called an *ENT* (which stands for ears, nose, and throat) or a *head and neck doctor*.

Pain specialists: Doctors, nurses, and/or pharmacists who are experts in pain control. In many places, there's a team of health professionals who are available to address pain issues.

Palliative (PAL-ee-uh-tiv) **Care Specialists:** Doctors, nurses, and/or pharmacists who help keep a person comfortable by managing bothersome symptoms, such as pain, nausea, or fatigue. They are not trying to cure the disease, but help the person have the best possible quality of life. They can help at any stage of cancer, from diagnosis to the end of life.

Palliative (PAL-ee-uh-tiv) **Care Team:** Typically includes a palliative care doctor who leads the team and works with a nurse, social worker, patient navigator, and maybe a person with a spiritual role such as a chaplain or a priest, to treat symptoms but not necessarily the cause of the symptoms.

Pathologist (path-AHL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in diagnosing and classifying diseases by lab tests and by looking at tissue and cells under a microscope. The pathologist determines whether a tumor is cancer, and, if cancer, the exact cell type (where it started) and grade (how fast it likely will grow).

Patient Navigator: The person who guides patients and their families through complex medical systems and helps them work with the rest of the cancer care team to overcome barriers to care that may come up so they can successfully complete their treatment. Navigators can be lay people with special training and experience or health care professionals, like nurses or social workers.

Pediatric Oncologist (PEE-dee-AT-trick on-KAHL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in caring for children and teens with cancer (sometimes up to age 21).

Pediatrician (PEE-dee-uh-TRISH-un): A doctor who specializes in caring for children and teens, including the prevention of illness, primary health care, and the treatment of diseases.

Physical (FIZ-ick-uhl) **Therapist (PT):** A licensed health professional, who has at least a Bachelor's Degree in physical therapy, who helps examine, test, and treat physical problems, and uses exercises, heat, cold, and other methods to restore or maintain the body's strength, mobility, and function.

Plastic Surgeon: A surgeon who specializes in changing the way a body part looks or in rebuilding or replacing removed or injured body parts. In reconstruction (rebuilding body parts), the surgeon may use tissue from the patient or some special material with the right consistency to hold a shape or form over time. Also called a *Plastic and Reconstructive* (REE-kon-STRUCK-tiv) *Surgeon*.

Primary Care Physician: The doctor a person would normally see first when a medical symptom or problem appears. A primary care doctor could be a general practitioner, a family practice doctor, a gynecologist, a pediatrician, or an internal medicine doctor (an internist).

Psychiatric Clinical Nurse Specialist (SY-key-AT-rick KLIN-ih-kull nurs SPESH-uh-list) (**CNS**): A registered nurse with a Master's Degree in psychiatric/mental health nursing who specializes in the mental health of patients. The psychiatric CNS may assess, counsel, or teach patients and/or families.

Psychiatrist (sy-KY-uh-trist): A medical doctor specializing in the causes, treatment, and prevention of mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders. Psychiatrists provide counseling and can also prescribe medicines or other treatments.

Psychologist (sy-KOLL-uh-jist): A health professional that has a graduate degree in psychology and training in clinical psychology. This specialist assesses a person's mental and emotional status and

provides testing and counseling services to those who may have an emotional or mental health problem.

Pulmonologist (PULL-muh-**NAHL**-uh-jist): A doctor who has specialized experience and knowledge in the diagnosis and treatment of lung (pulmonary) conditions and diseases.

Radiation Oncologist (RAY-dee-**A**-shun on-KAHL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in using radiation to treat cancer.

Radiation Therapist (RAY-dee-**A**-shun THER-uh-pist): A person with special training to use the equipment that delivers radiation therapy. This expert often helps the patient get into the right position for treatment and then actually gives the treatment.

Radiation Therapy Nurse: A registered nurse who is an expert in the radiation therapy care of patients. This nurse may teach the patient about treatment before it starts and help manage any treatment side effects.

Radiologic technologist (RAY-dee-uh-**LAH**-jick teck-NAH-luh-jist): A health professional who positions patients for x-rays and other imaging tests, takes the images, and then develops and checks the images for quality. The films taken by the technologist are then sent to a radiologist to be read.

Radiologist (RAY-dee-**AH**-luh-jist): A doctor with special training in diagnosing diseases by interpreting (reading) x-rays and other types of imaging studies that make pictures of the inside of the body.

Registered Nurse (RN): A professional nurse who has completed a college program and passed a national examination. RNs may assess, educate, and treat patients, families, or even communities. They may work in almost any health specialty, and can get more education to qualify for advanced practice such as oncology nurse specialist, nurse practitioner, and others.

Respiratory Therapist (RES-per-uh-TOR-ee THAIR-uh-pist): A professional who works with people who have breathing problems. This can include breathing treatments and managing patients on ventilators (breathing machines). A CRTT or *Certified Respiratory Therapy Technician* may also examine the patient, collect information about lung function, and set up and maintain equipment, such as ventilators.

Sex Therapist: A mental health professional such as a licensed psychiatrist, social worker, clinical nurse specialist, nurse practitioner, or psychologist with special training in counseling people about sexual changes, problems, and communication (for example, after treatment for cancer). It's common for a sex therapist to work with both sexual partners, rather than just one person.

Social Worker: A health professional with special training in dealing with social, emotional, and environmental problems that may come with illness or disability. A social worker may help people find community resources and support services, and provide counseling and guidance to help with issues such as insurance coverage, nursing home placement, and emotional distress.

Speech Therapist: A health professional who is specially trained to work with people who have speech and swallowing problems. Speech therapists help people learn skills to communicate and also make sure that patients can safely eat and drink. Also called a *Speech Pathologist* (path-AHL-uh-jist).

Surgeon: A doctor with special training who treats diseases by cutting or removing parts of the body.

Surgical Oncologist (on-KAHL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in using surgery to treat cancer.

Thoracic (thuh-RAS-ick) **Surgeon:** A doctor who operates on organs in the chest, including the lungs, ribs, the sternum (breast bone), the diaphragm (the muscle that helps breathing), and other associated muscles. The word thoracic refers to the *thorax*, another name for the chest.

Urologist (yur-AHL-uh-jist): A doctor who specializes in treating problems in the urinary tract in men.