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GUEST COMMENTARY

NH should support access to oral chemotherapy options

Health | The future of many cancer treatments lies not in daily IV sessions, but in a pill.

By MIKE ROLLO

"He was urgent, pragmatic and insistent."

So begins the description of Dr. Sidney Farber in Ken Burn's three-part documentary, *Cancer: The Emperor of All Maladies*, which recently premiered on PBS.

Dr. Farber is widely regarded as the father of modern chemotherapy, and his name is recognized across the country thanks to the Dana Farber Cancer Institute, which was named in recognition of his many achievements in cancer treatment.

Dr. Farber spent decades in a constant search for the "magic bullet" – a cure for cancer – and though the fact is that we still have not found this cure, we have made great strides in how we are

able to treat many forms of the disease. These advancements have encompassed not just medicines themselves, but the ways in which therapies are delivered, such as oral chemotherapy treatments that were traditionally available only by intravenous (IV) therapy.

Here in New Hampshire, we have the opportunity to join 37 other states, including all of New England, in ensuring that patients have access to the medications deemed most appropriate by their physician –

whether that treatment comes in pill form or through an IV while hooked to an infusion chair over the course of hours. The New Hampshire Senate recently voted in unanimous support of legislation – Senate Bill 137 – which requires health insurance coverage for orally administered cancer medications equivalent to that of therapies administered by IV, and this bipartisan bill will soon be voted on by the House.

The future of many cancer treatments lies not in daily IV sessions in a health care facility, but in a pill often taken at home. The promise of these new therapies brings hope to cancer patients and their families. However, it can also bring them thousands of dollars in added out of pocket costs.

Thanks to progress in cancer research, many types of chemotherapy can now be taken orally (as a liquid, tablet or capsule). This form of treatment is just as effective

as IV and works just as well. For those dealing with cancer, oral chemotherapy treatments can have a significant, positive impact on their quality of life since it has been proven often to have fewer side effects than IV chemotherapy. Because of this, patients receiving these treatments can often continue working.

Often there are no substitutes for oral chemotherapy, since many newer cancer drugs are

only available in pill form. Since 2012, eight of the 11 oncology drugs approved by the FDA are oral treatments with no IV equivalent. In the case where a patient cannot afford the out-of-pocket expense, they may not receive any other treatments. Moreover, with traditional IV chemotherapy, the financial burden for patients doesn't stop with direct medical costs. Patients lose work time to go to chemotherapy treatment. Usually, a friend or family member must also lose work time to transport the patient to treatment.

Private insurance plans generally cover IV chemotherapy as a medical benefit – with a modest patient co-pay and a limit on annual out-of-pocket costs – while oral chemotherapy is treated as a prescription drug benefit, requiring some patients to pay a significant portion of the drug's cost. Such coverage can make oral chemotherapy treatment very expensive and, as such, can limit physician and patient choice of treatment. By requiring coverage for orally administered

cancer medications that's equivalent to the coverage provided by IV therapies, the legislature could help solve this problem and make cancer treatments more affordable for patients in New Hampshire.

Cancer patients and survivors across the globe are forever indebted to men like Sidney Farber, who never gave up in the fight to find the best possible treatment for those diagnosed with this terrible disease.

In the decades since Dr. Farber's breakthrough work, many lives have been saved. But we must continue to follow in his footsteps and be "urgent, pragmatic and insistent" when it comes to cancer treatment – and here in New Hampshire, that means passing Senate Bill 137 and ensuring affordable access to oral chemotherapy for cancer patients.

Mike Rollo is director of government relations in New Hampshire for the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network and a member of the Coalition for Oral Chemotherapy Fairness.



ROLLO