



# Walk in their shoes: How real cancer patient and provider experiences drive care navigation decisions

## Executive Summary

May 2021

For patients, a cancer diagnosis is life changing. All too often, patients and their families are forced to make tough decisions and navigate a complex health care system on their own. While selecting the right site of care, weighing treatment options, and understanding coverage can be a burden for patients, it can also lead to inappropriate and unnecessary utilization and worse outcomes. By helping patients navigate care decisions, health plans can help ensure high-value care while driving patient experience and member engagement.

To help health plan leaders and plan sponsors understand the patient perspective and top opportunities to engage members and drive high-value care, Optum and Advisory Board assembled a panel of patients and clinicians. The panel included:

- **Shonte' Drakeford**: nurse practitioner, patient advocate, and metastatic breast cancer patient
- **Nancy Carruth**: IT director and breast cancer patient
- **Patty Migler**: nurse care manager, Optum Cancer Support Program
- **Tim Foley**: VP, Optum Oncology Management Programs, including Cancer Support Program and Cancer Guidance Program

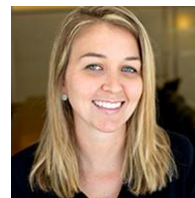
The event was facilitated by **Deirdre Saulet**, Expert Partner at Advisory Board. Across the panel, three key takeaways for health plans emerged:

### 1. **Diagnosis and treatment planning are the biggest opportunities to improve patient experience—and provide high-value cancer care.**

While every patient's path to a cancer diagnosis is unique, it is often cited as the most confusing and distressing point in the cancer journey. Drakeford and Carruth underscored the challenges getting to the right diagnosis with their stories. It took nearly five years for Drakeford's care team to take her symptoms and concerns seriously enough to screen for cancer, resulting in a diagnosis of metastatic breast cancer. With that diagnosis in hand, she was able to meet with a multidisciplinary team of oncology specialists who listened and account her needs in developing her care plan—one of the brightest spots for Shonte' across her experience.

In contrast, Carruth was originally diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer and told her only option would be palliative treatment. Fortunately, through her insurance, she was connected to a nurse care specialist, Patty Migler. Migler helped her understand the importance of seeing another specialist for a second opinion and was able to connect her to a center of excellence. This resulted in Carruth receiving surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy, and today she is cancer free.

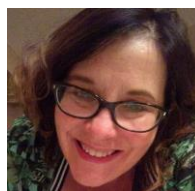
According to Migler, this situation happens more frequently than plans might expect. A critical component of her job is understanding each patient's situation and needs, and then ensuring they find the right cancer provider. Foley underscored how critical this is for cancer patients today as treatment options have evolved and adherence to evidence-based care is more important than ever. To ensure patients receive high-value care, Optum has designated centers of excellence (COE) to specialize in different cancers. To identify and evaluate COEs, his team uses established criteria, including quantitative and qualitative data, site visits, and expert panel review. Depending on a patient's diagnosis and situation, Optum then determine when to recommend patients to specific COEs, thus ensuring high-value care that meets patients' unique needs.



**Deirdre Saulet**  
Expert Partner and national spokesperson,  
Advisory Board



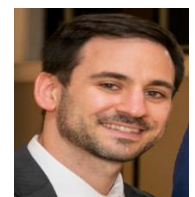
**Shonte' Drakeford**  
Nurse Practitioner,  
MBC patient and advocate



**Nancy Carruth**  
Principal software engineer, Optum,  
Breast cancer patient



**Patty Migler**  
Oncology nurse case manager, Optum  
Cancer Support Program



**Tim Foley**  
VP Product, Optum Medical Benefits  
Management

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**2. Patients and their families need comprehensive, specialized support to deal with the treatment- and non-treatment-related side effects of cancer.**

When patients receive a cancer diagnosis and undergo treatment, their lives are impacted in many ways—from physical side effects to behavioral health concerns to financial strain. According to Drakeford, the biggest challenge for patients is knowing what support exists and how to tap into it. Carruth underscored how critical this is for financial concerns specifically. Few Americans plan for the financial impact of cancer, and while many services exist to help patients manage their treatment and non-treatment-related costs, there is often hesitancy or confusion to use them. Migler and her team, which includes oncology social workers, spend considerable time with patients and their families helping them understand and navigate the services available to help them.

As Foley and his team at Optum have been evaluating how they connect with patients, one of the biggest opportunities they see is to provide 24/7 education and support. The current model of telephonic case management has led to significant improvements in patient utilization and quality of life—in fact, over 40,000 members tap into the team of 120 oncology nurses and medical oncologists. Moving forward, his goal is to amplify the ways patients can connect to this team of experts, including tapping into text, email, and digital.

**3. Patients are more than their diagnosis: Stakeholders need to understand what matters most to each patient and tailor care accordingly.**

To provide a truly excellent patient experience, all panelists agreed upon the importance of treating more than the disease. Every patient and family member will have unique goals, needs, and limitations. For Migler and her team of nurse care specialists, they find it is essential to spend time with each patient to listen, understand, and tailor support accordingly.

Carruth and Drakeford emphasized how critical being seen and treated as whole humans—not just cancer patients—has been for their overall health and wellbeing. Carruth found it incredibly important and motivating to work during treatment and, with Migler’s help, she was able to find flexibility to do so. Drakeford realizes that, given her diagnosis, her goal is to live the best life she can while she can. In an ideal world, with the appropriate expertise, support, and guidance, that is what every health plan should be aiming to promote for each of its members.

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Across cancer diagnosis, treatment, and survivorship, an individualized care plan is essential to achieve the greatest possible outcomes. Our panel stressed the importance of patient goals—from understanding how they want to spend free time to the physical results they aim to achieve. These goals need to be sensitively discussed, understood, and incorporated into care design by patients, families, and the entire care team. By clarifying individual goals, health plans can help support the patient’s journey with targeted education, resources, and support to ensure those goals are met and patients are actively engaged in their care.

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To watch the recorded webinar, please click [here](#).



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