Using Nurse Navigation to Improve Timeliness of Lung Cancer Care at a Veterans Hospital

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The Connecticut Veterans Affairs Healthcare System (CT-VAHCS) sought to improve the timeliness of lung cancer care by filling the new position of cancer care coordinator with an advanced practice nurse (APN) functioning as a nurse navigator. The multifaceted nature of diagnosing lung cancer and the barriers encountered by patients and families as they access the complex healthcare system contributed to substantial delays in diagnosing and treating this disease. Beginning in January 2007 when the cancer care coordinator was hired, she recorded data regarding timeliness and stage at diagnosis for all patients diagnosed with non-small cell lung cancer. CT-VAHCS created and modified several processes to improve timeliness and quality of cancer care as soon as a patient’s imaging suggested a new diagnosis of malignancy. The cancer care coordinator effected a measurable improvement in timeliness. In 2003, the average was 136 days from suspicion of cancer to treatment compared to 55 days in 2010, with a trend toward diagnosis of non-small cell lung cancer at an earlier stage. Oncology-certified APNs in the position of cancer care coordinator can engage multiple disciplines to generate process changes and improve timeliness of lung cancer care.