



CHOOSING THE RIGHT Cancer Surgeon

Getting a diagnosis of cancer can be life-changing. “People automatically hear that word and the world crushes down around them, but cancer is a treatable disease,” says Lee Starker, MD, PhD, surgical oncology specialist.

At Atlantic Surgical Oncology, doctors take a multidisciplinary approach, including chemotherapy, radiation and surgery. If a patient needs surgery, “finding the right entry point into the system is very important, in addition to finding the right doctor who can be the patient champion,” says Lawrence Harrison, MD, chief of Atlantic Surgical Oncology.

Dr. Starker says patients should “find a doctor whom they feel most comfortable with because, in the end, they are going to be going through a journey with that person.”

Surgical oncologists take care of most cancers except for lung, brain or gynecologic. Kai Bickenbach, MD, section chief of the Division of Surgical Oncology for Morristown Medical Center, says it is important to distinguish between a cancer surgeon and a general surgeon. “You need to know if they have done training in cancer surgery. It’s also important to know if the surgeon treats a certain number of cases annually.”

Eric Whitman, MD, medical director, Atlantic Health System oncology service line, says the cancer program sees about 6,000 new cancer

cases a year, more than many university cancer centers. When choosing a program and physician, he advises: “look for a place that has the necessary expertise with physicians who have seen this type of cancer before. It’s important that the program is data-driven and that nationally and internationally accepted guidelines and standards are being used, in addition to published medical data.”

But expertise is not the only thing to look for. Dr. Whitman says to “look for a place where you’re treated like a human being, not another number. From physicians and nurses to staff and the people answering the phone, our people are enthusiastic and compassionate about what they do. Everything we do is focused on the patient.”

For more information, visit atlanticealth.org/cancer.

ATLANTIC MEDICAL GROUP

Drs. Kai Bickenbach, Lawrence Harrison, Lee Starker and Eric Whitman are part of Atlantic Medical Group, a multispecialty network of health care providers. For more information, visit atlanticmedicalgroupnj.org.