

Palliative medicine clinic celebrates first year of care, collaboration

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Medical Director Sonia Malhotra, MD, MS, FAAP, an assistant professor of internal medicine and pediatrics at Tulane University School of Medicine, oversees the Palliative Medicine Program at University Medical Center New Orleans. The program recently celebrated its first anniversary. (Photograph by Paula Burch-Celentano)

The [Palliative Medicine Program](#) recently celebrated its first year of operation at University Medical Center New Orleans with a pair of anniversaries. On Aug. 1, the outpatient clinic marked its first anniversary; the inpatient clinic marked its first anniversary on Sept. 1. Together, the clinics have had more than 1,500 patient encounters.

Medical Director Sonia Malhotra, MD, MS, FAAP, an assistant professor of internal medicine and pediatrics at Tulane University School of Medicine, oversees the clinic. One of her primary goals is to change perceptions about palliative medicine as strictly end-of-life care.

“Palliative care is about the care of anybody with a serious illness,” Malhotra said. “It’s a majority of your hospitalized patients.”

The clinic sees many cancer patients, as well as individuals who have advanced heart failure, lung or liver disease, sickle cell anemia and other serious, chronic conditions, often on an ongoing basis and after they have been discharged from the hospital.

Such a setting requires the staff to work collaboratively with clinicians and specialists such as oncologists and neurologists to name a few. Communication skills are especially important, as long-term patients and their families need extra support.

“Our patients are becoming increasingly complex,” Malhotra said. “We work very collaboratively and collegially with our consultants. One of the beauties of palliative medicine is working collaboratively with them to come up with a good plan for our collective patients.”

All physicians are board-certified in palliative medicine, meaning they have completed extra training or a fellowship in the field.

Educating the next generation of healthcare providers ensures improved care for future patients. Malhotra taught a course at the Tulane School of Social Work and teaches Tulane and LSU medical students and works with them during their third-year clerkships.

Malhotra said she hopes to hire a few more doctors and support staff in the next year. The program will have the first palliative medicine fellowship in Louisiana by next summer, she said, calling the clinic’s growth a blessing.

“We have really been able to grow this program, and we really appreciate our administration and consultants and how much trust they put into us,” Malhotra added. “Our patients are some of the sickest ... they’re not dying from their serious illnesses, they’re living with them, and we need to give them that respect and encouragement.”

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