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Open microphone: Radiation therapists get creative

Talk about a tough act to follow. Faced with a particularly nervous patient, a trio of therapists in the Radiation Oncology Unit at Asante Rogue Regional have turned radiation therapy sessions into daily sing-alongs to help calm their patient's anxieties.



Radiation therapists Jennifer Rullamas, Daniah Al bicyclechi and Jason Kennedy

“We have some wonderful radiation therapists in our department,” said Gail Kessler, an oncology social worker at Asante Rogue Regional. “They will go to great lengths to care for their patients and to ensure that they have their treatment.”

Radiation therapists Daniah Al bicyclechi, Jennifer Rullamas and Jason Kennedy were forced to improvise recently when a patient showed up for cancer therapy but became extremely anxious about the process. Patient setups vary depending upon where on their bodies the radiation must be delivered, and the setup that seems to be the most difficult for patients involves a mask that is secured to the treatment

table to prevent the patient's head from moving.

“Patients receiving radiation treatment have to be completely immobilized because we are delivering large amounts of radiation to the tumor area and it needs to be extremely precise so we won't hit normal tissue,” Daniah said.

The anxious patient barely tolerated her treatment – with the immobilization mask – for the first two days of therapy.

“On the third day, everything changed,” Jennifer said. “She was nervous and nauseous. She couldn't lie down. Our nursing staff and physician tried giving her different medications, to no avail, and she missed a day of treatment.”

The fourth day was more of the same – extreme anxiety and ultimately another day without treatment.

“It is very critical in radiation that patients get their daily treatments,” Jennifer said. “Too many missed days can result in poor outcomes.”

A new medication was tried on the fifth day, but the patient's nervousness remained. She wanted her daughter in the room with her during treatment, but radiation risks make that impossible. Even

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the radiation therapists station themselves just outside the treatment room during therapy and interact with their patient by way of cameras and an intercom.

“Our patient said, ‘It would be nice if someone sang to me,’ and that’s how it all began,” Jennifer said.

Daniah, who offered up the vocal services of the radiation therapists, said the patient was “excited to try” the unusual approach – with the three staff members singing through the intercom.

“We started singing to her and she tolerated the treatment really well, and is now coming in for treatment five days a week – which is just perfect, Daniah said.

“We are singing nursery rhymes, and today started to sing some Disney songs,” Daniah said. “I printed all the lyrics, so we have one or two therapists singing to her and the other therapist watching her on the monitor.”

The patient has a few weeks of the treatments remaining – with each session taking 15 to 20 minutes, including setup – and her therapists are now confident that she’ll complete the therapy with no additional issues.

It’s not at all uncommon for patients to feel claustrophobic during treatment, and the therapy team sometimes needs to be creative. But Jennifer said she’s worked in the department for 15 years and has never had to be quite so innovative.

“Truthfully, I felt a little silly singing to our patient, but I am so happy we are getting her through treatment,” Jennifer said. “Our job is to help our patients make it through a very difficult time in their lives.”