

Center's head caters to mind, body



Dr. Barry Levinson, medical director of the Trinitas Comprehensive Cancer Center, shows the center's ultra-precise Trilogy radiotherapy machine. Photo by Elaine Durbach

Dr. Barry Levinson leads high-tech unit with human comforts

ELAINE DURBACH
NJN Bureau Chief/Central

Every now and then, patients or their family members ask Dr. Barry Levinson to pray with them. As a Jewish oncologist dealing more often than not with non-Jewish patients, Levinson treads a watchful path, careful to respect their views while staying true to his own.

Levinson is the medical director of the Trinitas Comprehensive Cancer Center in Elizabeth. He was appointed to the position this spring. As proud as he is of the cutting-edge, high-tech equipment at the center, he was equally keen to discuss the Catholic institution's commitment to providing a soothing environment for its patients, whatever their religious or cultural background.

That begins with the concierge, who greets each patient by name as they enter the building, and continues through the decor and layout and the provision of art therapy, massage, and all kinds of support groups. But most important of all might be the willingness to listen and talk — and sometimes to pray.

Levinson said he found guidance in the words of a rabbi in Dallas, where until a few months ago he was working at the Richardson Regional Cancer Center, an affiliate of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. He came across passionate prayer "warriors" there, groups who hold prayer vigils for the sick. It was an approach

he hadn't come across in Jewish communities, but then at a synagogue service he heard the rabbi discuss the prayer Moses said for his sister, Miriam, who was suffering from leprosy.

"He asked God to heal her, a clear example of praying for someone else's well-being," Levinson said.

For Levinson, such a request for healing isn't a prescription to God; rather it is a request for the emotional healing that comes from accepting whatever God's will might be. That acceptance can bring an opening up, communication, expressions of love, and — even in the midst of grief — a vivid appreciation of life.

"It's so important for people to be able to talk," Levinson said. "If they can be open about what's happening, it can be an opportunity for people to tie up loose ends. It can be an extraordinary time."

Ariela Finkiel, the center's Jewish director of program planning and development, who was born at Trinitas, joined Levinson for a tour of the design. They proudly pointed to the design. The center is laid out so that patients, who may be weak and tired, don't have to walk too far. Blood tests and scans can be done on the spot, with up-to-the-minute results available so treatment can be as specific as possible.

The center was the first in New Jersey to get the new Trilogy image-guided radiotherapy system, which can be fine-tuned with extraordinary precision to the ragged shape and uneven depth of each tumor. They don't have definitive figures yet on how that affects survival rates, but already they have seen side-effects dramatically reduced, said Linda Veldkamp, chief physicist and director of radiation oncology.

Levinson and Finkiel said they would

like to see the local Jewish community making better use of its facilities. No one is turned away, they said.

"It's amazing being in a setting that is so much more Jewish," Levinson said, comparing Elizabeth to Dallas. A number of the senior staff members are Jewish, and Trinitas makes a point of accommodating the religious and cultural mores of both staff and patients.

Coming north was a return to familiar territory for Levinson, who, with his wife and twin five-year-old daughters, lives in West Orange. He grew up in the New York area, graduated from Princeton, and went on to complete his medical degree at New York University, before going on to do his residency and fellowship in Dallas. He specialized in genitourinary cancer, melanoma, and head and neck cancer. He also became a registered investigator with the National Cancer Institute.

This wasn't the career he had in mind. At NYU, when he heard a friend was considering specializing in the disease, Levinson told him he must be mad. "But then I began to realize what an interesting field it is, how much scientific work there is to be done," he said. "It's a bit of a conversation stopper at cocktail parties when I say what I do. People always say, 'Isn't it depressing?' — but really it isn't. There's been so much progress, and it's ever changing."

Perhaps, he said, his attitude parallels the way Jews speak about the Holocaust, linking the tragedy to the renewal of Jewish life in Israel. Cancer, for all its pain and personal tragedy, also provides opportunities for growth, and for a doctor, the chance every day to make a difference in people's lives.

edurbach@njewishnews.com