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Cancer Patients Relying More on Friends, Family for Treatment Advice

Fairfax, Va. – More cancer patients and their loved ones are making decisions on what treatments to undergo based on the advice of their friends and family, according to a study commissioned by the American Society for Therapeutic Radiology and Oncology (ASTRO). In 2003, 7 percent of cancer patients and their families made their treatment decision after talking to friends and family. In 2007, however, this increased to 16 percent. The survey, conducted by Public Opinion Strategies of Alexandria, Va., randomly interviewed 500 American adults. Of the 500 people surveyed, 39 percent indicated that they or a member of their household had been treated for cancer.

“There is so much information out there – both accurate and misleading – for patients to try to digest. They are getting information online, from various specialists and from medical organizations like ASTRO. It makes perfect sense that patients and their families are collecting all this information and then asking their friends and family to help them make a smart decision,” said Louis Harrison, M.D., a radiation oncologist at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City and President of the Board of Directors for ASTRO.

Making treatment decisions with the help of family and friends is on the rise, as people widen their sources of information beyond the advice of their doctors and increasingly use the Internet and other public sources of data. In 2003, 56 percent of cancer patients and their families made their decision based upon the advice of their oncologist and 45 percent said they made their decision with the help of their primary care physician. However, in 2007, only 50 percent relied on the advice of their oncologist and 41 percent said they relied on their primary care doctor.

“This survey confirms for us that patients are indeed looking for information on their treatment options at their doctors’ offices and on the Internet, two areas of focus for ASTRO,” said Dr. Harrison. In 2003, ASTRO launched a public awareness campaign to help people living with cancer and their loved ones better understand all their treatment options. The campaign included colorful, easy-to-understand patient brochures in

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English and Spanish and a dedicated patient Web site located at www.rtanswers.org. The information was created to be simple and factual with pictures to help patients understand how radiation therapy works to cure cancer.

“With all the information streaming from radio, television, newspapers and the Web, Americans are simply inundated with information, and cancer patients and their families are no exception,” said Bill McInturff, a partner at Public Opinion Strategies. “Understanding how people with cancer think when they are making their treatment decisions will help their physicians know what resources need to be developed to help their patients make informed treatment decisions.”

For a presentation further explaining the survey or to interview Dr. Harrison, please contact Julie Barden at julieb@astro.org. To interview Bill McInturff, please contact Sarah Berquist at sarah@pos.org

ASTRO is the largest radiation oncology society in the world, with more than 8,600 members who specialize in treating patients with radiation therapies. As the leading organization in radiation oncology, biology and physics, the Society is dedicated to the advancement of the practice of radiation oncology by promoting excellence in patient care, providing opportunities for educational and professional development, promoting research and disseminating research results and representing radiation oncology in a rapidly evolving socioeconomic healthcare environment.

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