

## Why You Should Care About Community Cancer Care

By Joyce Whittet

In 2006, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. My cancer was caught very early and I only needed six weeks of external beam radiation therapy treatments. I was fortunate to have a radiation therapy center nearby in Fruitland, Idaho, 15 minutes away from my home near Ontario, Oregon.

The proximity of my treatment center was important because as the weeks wore on, I found myself increasingly tired from the daily radiation treatments. The treatments themselves were painless and quick, very much like receiving an X-ray. However, it did take time to get to the clinic, park, check in, change clothes and receive the treatment. I feel very fortunate because fatigue was the only real side effect from my 1 ½ months of cancer treatments.

I am very concerned about a recent proposal from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), the agency that oversees the Medicare health insurance I have, that would cut payments to radiation oncology centers like where I was treated by up to 30 percent. My doctors tell me that if these cuts go into effect on January 1, 2010, that they and many other centers that serve patients like me would be forced to close. If my cancer center were forced to close, I would have had to drive two hours each day to a hospital. Many clinics that stay in business would have to stop seeing Medicare patients and the vast majority would have to lay off staff and cut benefits and salaries.

New technology and improved techniques have allowed radiation oncologists, like the one who treated me, to dramatically improve radiation treatments. This has helped them more effectively kill cancer cells while not hurting healthy parts of the body. Better treatments result in better cure rates and significantly fewer side effects. I feel strongly that the continued improvements to cancer treatments should not be stopped by cuts to Medicare.

Every year over one million patients like me receive radiation therapy as they battle cancer. We all deserve access to quality cancer treatment as close as possible to our homes. Cutting needed cancer services will result in less access to care, lower cure rates and more suffering for patients. Limiting access to care is the exact opposite of what I thought Washington, D.C., is trying to do.

Reps. Lois Capps (D-Calif.), Sue Myrick (R-N.C.), Mike Rogers (R-Mich.) and Parker Griffith (D-Ala.) have drafted a bipartisan letter to Health and Human Services Secretary Sebelius urging her to stop these cuts and protect access to care for cancer patients. Please join me, as well as doctors, nurses, patients and cancer survivors from across the country, by urging your Member of Congress to sign onto this bipartisan letter. Go to [www.rtanswers.org](http://www.rtanswers.org) to tell Medicare to preserve access to cancer care.

Joyce Whittet

Ontario, Oregon