

# Offering hope and emotional support

## Florida Cancer Institute

Thomas H. Tang, MD

**C**ancer treatment begins with informing a patient that he or she has a malignancy, a daunting task for even the most compassionate and tactful oncologist. We asked Thomas H. Tang, MD, how he helps his patients and their families deal with a cancer diagnosis and all its implications.

**Q: Dr. Tang, what happens when a patient comes in and is given a diagnosis of cancer?**

**A:** People have the normal emotional reactions. Understandably, they sometimes go into denial. They usually get quite anxious; however, they may also get angry. They may get depressed, too. The same is true for the family.

In fact, the strong support of close family members is crucial to newly diagnosed cancer patients. In Hernando County, we actually have many patients who live without good family support, and that's a real challenge. We spend a great deal of time dealing with this issue.

The most important thing is explaining to our patients what's going on, and letting them know that there is hope. Many times,

when we give people the news, whether we tell them we think they're going to be cured or not, they don't accept it. They need to have us explain everything to them, and part of that explanation involves mapping out a treatment plan.

**Q: What is the most challenging aspect of presenting a cancer patient with a diagnosis?**

**A:** Breaking bad news is usually difficult. Sometimes it can be easy, if the patient is well informed and ready. Many times, however, they are not ready, and we have to find out how much the patient understands. We always want to get the family involved. They come to our office, and we always ask how much they understand. If they come to us without any information, we have to walk them through it and tell them in plain language what's going on. Only then can they accept the reality.

**Q: What types of treatment options are there for cancer patients?**

**A:** There are two general categories of cancer treatment:



There's life after cancer for most patients today.

curative and palliative. Palliative treatment means we can prolong the patient's life or alleviate symptoms such as pain, but the tumor may never be eradicated, in which case we must make them as comfortable as possible. There are three basic options for either category: general surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy. Whether these are used singly or in combination depends upon the patient's diagnosis and the stage of the disease. Sometimes one of these modalities is enough, whereas other times we will employ all three. We may also employ medication management after surgery. After breast cancer surgery, for example, a patient might have hormonal treatment like tamoxifen.

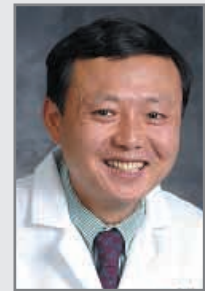
**Q: What does Florida Cancer Institute do for patients to help address the emotional aspects of cancer diagnosis?**

**A:** Our doctors and nurses are highly experienced with these situations and are exceedingly supportive. We spend half of our time with patients talking about the treatment and the other half talking about all of the psycho-

social issues surrounding cancer care. We often have to give the patient and family written information, including articles and pamphlets, they can refer to later. Most importantly, we always provide "concierge" communication service: patients and their families can reach us 24/7.

We learn this on the job; they don't teach it in school. But we deal with it every day. We are on the phone frequently and always keep families informed.

It's important to note that the majority of today's cancer patients do extremely well. They maintain good performance status, even working full time. Once patients realize that, it gives them hope, and most are then on the road to recovery. **FHCN—Michael J. Sabno**



Thomas H. Tang, MD

- Board certified by the American Board of Internal Medicine, with subspecialty certification in medical oncology and hematology
- Fellowship, medical oncology and hematology, New York University Medical Center/ Kaplan Comprehensive Cancer Center
- Medical degree, West China University of Medical Sciences, People's Republic of China, and the University of Geneva, Faculty of Medicine, Switzerland
- Internal medicine residency, Lenox Hill Hospital, New York City

## Leading the charge against cancer ...

*Dr. Tang welcomes calls from those interested in learning more about new cancer treatment and related topics. For further information, please call (352) 596-1926. Florida Cancer Institute is located at 7154 Medical Center Dr. in Spring Hill.*