Sloan Kettering physician delivers message of hope

By DEBORAH SKOLNIK

It’s not often you meet someone who hopes her line of work will become obsolete. Yet that’s the fondest wish of Elizabeth Comen, M.D., an assistant attending physician at Memorial Hospital for Cancer and Allied Diseases. “I would love to be out of a job,” she told a crowd of more than 200 at the Scarsdale Golf Club on Thursday, Oct. 10. “I would be doing a thousand other things happily.”

Comen, a breast oncologist and leading cancer researcher, was the keynote speaker of Cancer Support Team’s 21st Annual Gayle K. Lee Health Awareness Luncheon. “Any opportunity I have to engage with the public, answer questions, and hopefully allay people’s fear is an honor and a privilege,” she said. Her lecture, “Immunotherapy Today,” was designed to achieve all three goals.
Comen told the audience how she first came to be interested in oncology in her youth by watching a family friend and an aunt struggle with breast cancer and through volunteering at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston. After attending Harvard College and Harvard Medical School, Comen moved to New York and completed her residency at Mount Sinai Hospital. She then was a medical oncology fellow at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center while also completing a medicine fellowship at Weill Cornell Medical College. Her training included an advanced breast medicine fellowship at MSKCC.

Today, Comen said, she divides her time between seeing breast cancer patients and researching immunotherapy — the concept of using the body’s own immune system to fight cancer cells. “The idea of the same cells that fight infection [also] curing cancer or treating cancer or recognizing cancer is complicated, because if you rev up your immune system too much, that's when you have things like autoimmune diseases or allergies,” she explained.

One somewhat recent advance in immunology has been the development of so-called anti-CTLA-4 medications. “They take the brakes off the immune system in a very specific way,” Comen said, allowing the body to recognize cancer cells as threats, and to try to kill them. “This class of medications has dramatically revolutionized how we treat cancer,” she said. Anti-CTLA-4 drugs have saved people on death’s door from melanoma, and these and similar drugs have also been approved for lung and kidney cancer.
“But breast cancer has been very tricky,” Comen added. “The problem with many breast cancers is that they have this invisible cloak around them that does not allow them to be recognized. So some of the studies that we’re doing at Memorial Sloan Kettering that are really the first of their kind [are meant] to get the breast cancer to be recognized by the immune system.”

In one study Comen led, researchers would freeze a piece of a tumor and release its dead proteins back into the subject’s body. This, she said, helped the immune system and cancer drugs recognize and fight cancer cells.

“We’ve demonstrated in the lab and also in patients that you can really enhance the immune system to fight a cancer, so that’s been really exciting,” Comen said.

Also exciting: an immunotherapy drug is now available to treat metastatic triple-negative breast cancer, which doesn’t respond to some common drug treatments and hormone therapy. “The idea that these are some cancers that might be amenable to immunotherapy is absolutely tremendous,” Comen told the audience. In addition, immunotherapy is now being put to work for earlier-stage breast cancer patients, she said.

The physician had one last intriguing finding to share: Some of the immune cells that mix with cancer cells look normal under a microscope, but in fact have mutations associated with leukemia. “We’ve been developing and looking at why the cells are there, and what we might do to actually target them,” she said.

If Comen left the audience in awe of her work, she was equally awed by the work of Cancer Support Team. Founded in 1978, the not-for-profit agency provides no-cost assistance to anyone living in southern Westchester who is diagnosed with cancer. “I’ve really been moved by hearing about everything that you all contribute to, are a part of, volunteer for,” Comen told CST members in the audience before a short question-and-answer session.

Tania Weiss, executive director of CST, said she takes pride in the organization’s wide range of offerings. “We do five different things,” she said. “One is nursing… that level of nursing is having an educated person who is really knowledgeable about cancer being able to answer your questions and help you understand what’s going on.”
CST also provides guidance in handling medical paperwork and, when necessary, applying for benefits such as Social Security, disability and food stamps.

“We also have a social worker who will go to your home,” Weiss added. The trained professional can help a patient explain what’s going on to their children or employer, and can aid families with bereavement.

In addition, CST offers financial assistance. “Three out of four of our patients are medically underserved — often that means they don’t have insurance or don’t have adequate insurance or their insurance doesn’t cover all of their treatment,” Weiss noted. Using grants, CST is able to award small sums of aid to clients in need. Last but not least, the organization offers transportation to and from cancer treatments.

Scarsdale resident Bill Doescher, a CST advisory board member, shares Weiss’s pride in the group’s accomplishments. “The Cancer Support Team is one of the finest nonprofit organizations I have ever been associated with,” he said. “The staff and board members are the most personable and professional, as well as hugely enthusiastic in their approach to serving people with a primary diagnosis of cancer who reside in Southern Westchester County and have a physician and a responsible caregiver… In the years ahead, CST can only continue its growth and be more important to an increasing number of cancer patients in Westchester as it grows with sophistication and more volunteers and a most dedicated staff.”

Contact CST at (914) 777-2777
www.cancersupportteam.org