

It's the patients who win

Dr. Robert C. Martin approaches his work as a surgical oncologist the same way he takes to the blacktop when road biking or hiking tough trails – vigorously, with his eye on a strong finish. It's this determination that makes him an invaluable asset to patients at the University of Louisville's James Graham Brown Cancer Center.



An award-winning surgical oncologist and Associate Professor in the University's Department of Surgery in the Division of Surgical Oncology, Dr. Martin's goal is to help patients finish strong and win the ultimate prize: their good health.

"I believe in taking an aggressive multi-disciplinary approach to treatment," offers Dr. Martin.

"Those historic boundaries that used to occur – surgeons just doing surgery, oncologists just doing dosing, and radiologists just doing radiological concepts – are now blurred so that we have people taking action together as a unified group. It allows us to provide more dynamic combination care, and is integral to our success."

Part of the Center's team for more than six years, Dr. Martin's practice centers on the GI tract, esophagus, colon, liver, and peripancreatic malignancies.

"99% of my patients have some sort of cancer diagnosis including esophageal, gastric, primary liver cancer, liver metastasis, and colon cancer. I see all types of cases at every stage of disease expression. I manage the "flow" of the patient, deciding what combination of treatments the person receives and when, because so many treatment options are available these days."

It's this emphasis on collaborative care that Dr. Martin feels generates the best results, yet, challenges remain.

"I think we've begun to employ the multi-disciplinary approach in a good way," he explains. "There isn't one modality out there that's shown as positive results as compared to those we see with combination therapy. I've been lucky and blessed to have a team willing to put away their own individual biases and truly work together in a collaborative effort. The challenge now though, is to get this type of consistency across a larger region."

With combination therapy figuring prominently in his treatment plans, Dr. Martin has been actively seeking out innovative, cutting-edge treatments that enhance this multi-disciplinary approach, such as TheraSphere®, a liver cancer treatment. A micro-brachytherapy deploying Yttrium-90 microspheres directly to the tumor bed via the hepatic artery, TheraSphere

immediately attracted his interest.

"I was searching for better therapies when I found TheraSphere; I strongly wanted to find treatments that were an improvement over the conventional ones we'd been using," he notes.

After quickly establishing TheraSphere as a treatment at the Center, he began offering it to patients as part of a combined regimen. The results are impressive.

"We have multiple success stories of patients with advanced disease expression - these are patients who hear that dreaded 'six months to live' comment - but have gone on to receive multi-modality therapy and end up doing quite well," says Dr. Martin. "My bias is that new treatments like TheraSphere and conventional treatments are complementary, rather than competitive."

One case in particular stands out as proof of the effectiveness of multi-modality therapy.

"We treated a happily married 40-year old mother of two who was diagnosed with hepatocellular carcinoma in a non-cirrhotic liver. Prior to seeing us, she actually underwent resection but had recurrence after two months. She was also diagnosed with portal vein thrombosis, preventing her from being treated elsewhere," he remembers. "Luckily, she found us and we successfully gave her anti-antigenic therapy combined with TheraSphere, facilitating a complete radiologic response, resolution of her portal vein thrombosis, and enabling transplantation. It's our biggest success story of a patient going from advanced stage four disease to complete radiologic response. It's also a great example of how collaboration works successfully."

His experience with TheraSphere and other new technologies, as well as his successes in applying multi-disciplinary, multi-modality treatment has led Dr. Martin to share his expertise with others. He also believes this trend in collaborative care will lead to new advances down the road.

"The real advances are going to come in combination therapy – precisely directed oral and systemic therapies, as well as locoregional treatments such as micro-brachytherapy, microwave ablation, RFA, and chemoembolization merging with resection and transplantation, resulting in a truly multi-disciplinary approach."

In the end, it's the patients who will win, much to Dr. Martin's delight.