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Treating tumors is family calling for Shore Cancer Center's new doctors

NASSAWADOX – The name Sinesi echoes through cancer treatment circles across the state.

Three of the four brothers in this New England family not only went into medicine, they chose the same specialty, radiation oncology. Between them, they help run multiple cancer programs across southern Virginia and into North Carolina.

And now they're part of the staff at Shore Cancer Center.

In fact, Drs. Mathew and Chris Sinesi travel over the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel every week to guide patients through the radiation portion of their cancer treatment.

"Initially we thought it would be who draws the short straw to make the drive," Mathew Sinesi said. "Now we fight over it. This is a delightful place to work."

Christopher Sinesi says it's especially refreshing to work in a facility where the medical oncologists are under the same roof – in most places their offices are offsite – and the hospital is close by. "It's one of the finest that we've had the pleasure of working in," he said. "It's a marvelous arrangement. The close collaboration between the medical oncologists and radiation oncologists is important in care."

And now the brothers are guiding the cancer center through what may be its biggest transition since opening in 2003. They recently added intensity-modulated radiation therapy,



Dr. Mathew Sinesi helps guide patients through the radiation portion of their treatment at Shore Cancer Center.

which allows more precise targeting of a cancerous area, sparing more healthy tissue. IMRT is particularly useful for prostate, lung and head and neck cancers.

In the future they may begin implanting radioactive seeds, needles or capsules right into a patient's body, to fight tumors around the clock. This treatment is used most often for prostate and gynecologic cancers.

"We're going to be able to do everything here that can be done elsewhere," Mathew Sinesi said.

If fighting cancer is a family calling, it started when Mark, the oldest of the four brothers, completed a Ph.D. in radiation chemistry. "He decided it was a really fascinating field," Mathew Sinesi said. "At the time my brother Chris and I were in medical school trying to decide what to do with our lives."

Radiation as a cancer treatment was a bit obscure back then, so when Chris and Mathew graduated from Boston University Medical School, it took some time to find a place to do their residencies. Both ended up at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center.

They talked Mark, who was doing research, into going to medical school to pursue the same field. He has since returned to academia and is now chairman of radiation at the Eastern Virginia Medical School.

Meanwhile, Chris completed his residency in 1986, followed by Mathew the next year. They set about deciding where to go next. "We were in Houston together looking at a map of the United States," Mathew said. "We wanted to live on the East Coast and we were from Boston. We had to live near the ocean. We saw an opening at DePaul."

The brothers moved to Hampton Roads and started Oncology Associates of Virginia, a business run today by their brother, Peter, and their 83-year-old mother.

In addition to DePaul Medical Center in Norfolk, their firm helps run cancer programs at Chesapeake General Hospital, Maryview Medical Center in Portsmouth and Obici Hospital of Suffolk. Oncology Associates of Virginia has also opened two freestanding cancer centers at Nags Head and Ahoskie in North Carolina.

The staff has grown beyond the family and today includes 12 other doctors.

The mission is to make high-tech treatment accessible to all – even those who live in remote areas. It's a philosophy in keeping with that of Shore Cancer Center.

"If you prevent patients from having to travel long distances it can be life-saving," Mathew said. "Radiation is given on a daily basis usually for two to eight weeks. It can be devastating. We'd rather drive than have patients drive."

Shore Cancer Center Director Chuck Ward says the Sinesis are a great addition to the staff. “They have such a way about them with the patient,” he said.

The brothers give their cell phone numbers freely, for example. “There’s no barrier,” Mathew said. “Every patient has my cell phone number that I carry 24 hours a day. There’s nothing more frustrating than being sick and not being able to reach someone. I never want that to happen to anyone.”

Ward said the Sinesis’ broad reach will also help local cancer patients. “They have extensive connections,” he said. “They’re very well known and very well respected.”

Mathew agreed that a second look is especially helpful in difficult or rare cases – and with the Sinesis, it comes with the territory. “Every patient gets 12 opinions because we all discuss each patient all the time,” he said.

For more information about Shore Cancer Center, call 757-414-8355.

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Shore Health Services is an integrated healthcare delivery organization that includes Shore Memorial Hospital, Shore LifeCare at Parksley, Shore Rehab, Shore Cardiopulmonary Wellness Services, Shore Healthcare at Home, Shore Cancer Center, School of Practical Nursing, Shore Medical Center at Metompkin, Lingle & Goldstein Surgical Associates, Shore Orthopedic Associates, Shore Psychiatric Services and Senior Perspectives. For more information call Shore Health Services at 414-8051.