

## OHANCAW: A Week to Make a Difference

The 2014 Oral, Head and Neck Cancer Awareness Week® (OHANCAW), led annually by the Head and Neck Cancer Alliance (HNCA), is scheduled for April 20-26. OHANCAW is a weeklong series of events promoting awareness of oral, head, and neck cancer. The capstone is a day of free cancer screenings. Two Academy members who have long been involved with the awareness week are private practitioner **Wendy B. Stern, MD**, and professor **Cherie-Ann O. Nathan, MD**. Wanting to share the physician experience of OHANCAW, Dr. Stern, chair of the Academy's Media and Public Relations Committee, interviewed Dr. Nathan about her 18 years celebrating Oral, Head and Neck Cancer Awareness Week.

### Wendy B. Stern, MD: Why Is Oral, Head and Neck Cancer Awareness Week (OHANCAW) important?

**Cherie-Ann O. Nathan, MD:** Head and neck cancer is an orphan disease that has not received much publicity, unlike breast or prostate cancer. Unfortunately, the majority of our patients present with advanced stage disease. Recurrence and survival is significantly worse for advanced stage disease. Hence why educating the public about early signs, symptoms, and lifestyle risk factors—especially the benefits of voluntary screening—will decrease the poor outcomes in our patient population. For example, previous surveys conducted by Harris Interactive on behalf of the HNCA have shown that a small percentage of the public is aware of the symptoms and risk factors associated with the human papillomavirus (HPV). There is an epidemic of HPV-associated oropharyngeal cancers and educating the public about this disease, its prevention, and early detection is important.

Planning for OHANCAW helps us as surgeons to step back and see how we can reach out and contribute to the education of our community, recognize

our cancer survivors, and celebrate with their families. Many institutions use this week to have educational sessions for school kids about the health hazards of tobacco, host survivor banquets, and offer free screenings. The community at large comes together for OHANCAW.

### Stern: So what do you think is the biggest gap in public education when it comes to oral, head, and neck cancers? Any misconceptions?

**Nathan:** Although the public is well aware of smoking risks and cancer, it has become obvious to us through OHANCAW that they are not as educated about the association between chewing tobacco and head and neck cancer. One of our Louisiana HNCA state chapter board members has been educating kids on local baseball teams about avoiding chewing tobacco as her tobacco-chewing husband succumbed to tongue cancer in his 30s. Persistent sore throat and a neck mass for example are important symptoms people should note and yet are

often ignored, as many are unaware that they require attention.

### Stern: How do you celebrate Oral, Head and Neck Cancer Awareness Week (OHANCAW)?

**Nathan:** Each year the Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery Department at LSU-Health Shreveport conducts free screenings at the Feist-Weiller Cancer Center (FWCC). Our unique program, "Partners in Wellness," has a mobile van that is used to provide free cancer screenings. Some of the events have included:

- Free screenings with United Way and Shreveport Bossier Rescue Mission, a homeless shelter in Shreveport.
- Free screenings at Barksdale Air Force Base during the air show. We also talked about sun protection and prevention of skin cancers and handed out samples of free sunscreen.
- Free screenings at two local college campuses, Centenary College and LSU-Shreveport, to educate college kids about the risk factors associated



Cherie-Ann O. Nathan, MD is the fourth person from the left.



numbers during the screening week. Just knowing that we are educating the public about the risk factors, early signs, and symptoms for head and neck cancer has been very gratifying for our entire staff.

**Stern: What do you remember most from the first screening you hosted?**

**Nathan:** The fun that our entire team had putting the event together and the influence we had on the community are what I remember most. It was very rewarding and indelibly etched in our memory. We have made a point to commit to this event every year since.

We were expecting people at risk for head and neck cancer to attend the free screenings (i.e., smokers), but attendees included those who did not necessarily have any of the risk factors and were routinely seeing their primary care physicians. Since then, we have started using the mobile screening van provided by the Cancer Center to go out to sites where high-risk groups could be screened. Other institutions around the country have had unique events such as screenings at NASCAR races to promote awareness of head and neck cancer.

**Stern: So you've participated in this observance for 18 years. What keeps you coming back?**

**Nathan:** As a head and neck surgeon who treats this special patient population, it is frustrating that most patients present with advanced stage disease and therefore

with HPV-associated oropharyngeal tumors, in addition to risks of tobacco use. In Louisiana, among youth aged 12-17 years, 11 percent smoke. The new wave of Hookah smoking has the same deleterious effects and it is important that we educate our youth.

- Free screenings at a patient's church in Monroe, LA. That patient's wife, who is also a patient advocate with her legislators, arranged for us to screen. As a patient advocate she has volunteered to help educate legislators about the importance of reimbursement for prosthesis as our patients suffer severe functional loss affecting speech and swallowing. This affects the ability to go back to work and in turn affects productivity.

**Stern: When did you get involved in OHANCAW and why?**

**Nathan:** The Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery Dept. at LSU-Health Shreveport has been involved with free screenings since 1996 when the HNCA was known as the Yul Brynner Head and Neck Foundation. Terry Day, President of the HNCA, had reached out to us and we started our screenings. Our head and neck coordinator Teresa Harris is passionate about the screening week and puts in a lot of time and effort into planning this event every year. As a result of our funding from the National Cancer Institute, we publicized this event through the *Shreveport Times*, news and radio stations. Our turnout has always been good and we enroll some of the highest



have high recurrence rates. Educating the public about early signs, symptoms, and risk factors is important to mitigating this issue. I believe free screenings provide that opportunity for the community.

Also, OHANCAW brings people together in a way that has really surprised me. The institution and physicians have to make sacrifices in terms of cancelled clinics and ORs to make this happen. It is also popular amongst medical students who like to volunteer their time. We have made it fun for our residents and students by having crawfish broils and jambalaya after the screening, too.

### Stern: Any interesting anecdotes?

**Nathan:** A few years ago when the epidemic of HPV-associated oropharyngeal cancers was first noted, we decided to screen on college campuses. We typically hold free screening events on Fridays. A college professor told me that we would get a lower turnout as kids leave campus early on Friday. This professor is also a board member of our HNCA Louisiana Chapter, and so intent on raising awareness among his students he announced he would give them credit and bonus points if they showed up for the event. It worked! It was one of the best-attended screenings.

We once had a screening at a fire station, as the fire marshal's wife was a head and neck cancer patient. He had challenged his fire department to raise money by selling T-shirts for breast cancer awareness week. Expecting only a few hundred dollars in sales, he pledged to personally match the funds raised by the department to give to cancer research. The fire department raised \$8,000 and he happily matched the funds.

### Stern: What are the pearls and the pitfalls for setting up a successful screening program?

**Nathan:**

- Identify a coordinator who enjoys putting the event together and is passionate about head and neck patients.
- Get the community involved—school board members, church groups, and homeless shelters—and reach out to

remote areas where healthcare is not easily accessible.

- Have your institution's public relations team help with publicity so the community knows about the event.
- Identify a celebrity who has been diagnosed with head and neck cancer, as that always seems to get people's attention. When Michael Douglas was kind enough to be our spokesperson a few years ago, we had one of the best turnouts of all the sites in the U.S.
- Get other nearby members involved as they come up with wonderful ideas thanks to their local knowledge.
- Be aware that this does require a commitment from the department and institution as you do run fewer clinics and ORs on screening day in order to have personnel available for the event.

### Stern: Do you have any advice for the physician in a non-academic setting who would like to participate?

**Nathan:** I believe the private practice group setting would also have to make the same time commitment. I would suggest getting nurse practitioners or physician assistants involved to set up

free screenings, or talk to the hospital where you practice to help run the event.

This year, we have all but seven states signed up for free screenings. I encourage other Academy members to celebrate OHANCAW and give back to the community. Be sure to let HNCA know of your Oral, Head and Neck Cancer Awareness Week event, too.

### Want to Participate?

AAO-HNS members who wish to host a free screening event during OHANCAW® (April 20-26) should go to [www.ohancaw.headandneck.org/setup](http://www.ohancaw.headandneck.org/setup) where you can:

- Register as a free screening site
- Get tips on how to organize a screening as well as other events to promote oral cancer awareness, such as middle school talks and walkathons
- Download a variety of materials for use with your screening event including:
  - Patient screening forms (English and Spanish)
  - Press materials for use with your local media to publicize your screening
  - Posters to promote the event [b](#)

