

2017 Champion Award Recipient- Connie Szczepanek



As administrative Director of the Cancer Research Consortium of West Michigan, her professional passion and life's work exemplify extraordinary dedication to those with cancer and those in danger of developing it. That passion, fueled by personal tragedy, has fused into a force against cancer through her exemplary leadership, tireless advocacy and devotion to cancer prevention and control. After losing a sister to breast cancer, Connie, a former oncology and research nurse, became active in the cancer prevention arena of cancer research and in many community groups and projects to increase cancer awareness, clinical trials education, promote screening, and link people to needed services. She has been a champion of initiatives to prevent and control cancer and improve the quality of life for patients and families. As a long-time urology nurse, she became deeply involved as Research Coordinator in the Prostate Cancer Prevention Trials conducted by the National Cancer Institute (NCI). As a result of her work with patients and families, she led a group of survivors in forming THE SURVIVORS: Prostate Cancer Support Group in Grand Rapids, which she has served as volunteer director since 1992. The research consortium she has headed for almost 20 years is a network of West Michigan hospitals, health care systems, physicians and researchers working together to provide cancer clinical trials to adults and children in West Michigan. As director of the consortium, designated as a National Cancer Institute Community Oncology Research Program (NCORP), 1 of only 34 in the country, Connie Szczepanek has significantly contributed to: * increasing accessibility to innovative treatment and prevention trials in patients' home communities; * spearheading regional, state and national cooperation and collaboration in the effort; * advocating tirelessly for patients through the creation of the first Patient Advisory Committee in NCORP history. Now, almost 10 years old, the committee has become a national model for patient involvement in the fight against cancer. In addition to her strong leadership, implementation skills, and advocacy for cancer control/treatment trials, she tirelessly pushes herself to help reach the ultimate goal: Cancer prevention.

2016 Champion Award Recipient- Elisabeth Heath



Elisabeth Heath, MD, is a medical oncologist and a professor in the department of oncology at Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute or KCI and Wayne State University, is a true cancer prevention and control champion; a strong force and leader on many fronts.

As a professor of oncology, her research focus is conducting clinical and translational research trials in genitourinary malignancies by investigating novel therapeutics for preventing and treating cancer. She is known for building effective multidisciplinary teams that work to find more effective and less toxic ways to treat prostate cancer and to also reduce disparities in prostate cancer outcomes.

Dr. Heath is co-investigator or consultant on several National Cancer Institute grants as well as internal KCI grants. Importantly, she also spearheaded a Specialized Program of Research Excellence (SPORE) application in 2011 entitled “Karmanos Cancer Institute Detroit Prostate Cancer SPORE” - the only SPORE application from KCI/Wayne State University in the last 20 years. The amount, and levels, of research and collaborative work the SPORE has generated speaks to its importance.

She is the medical director of the chemotherapy infusion clinic and also provides support and direction to the Patient and Community Education Department. She created and now leads the KCI Prostate Cancer Advocacy Program, a comprehensive team of providers dedicated to the prevention and cure of prostate cancer by embracing the patient and family perspective. As part of this, a prostate cancer education program was developed to specifically reach African Americans in the Detroit community. Dr. Heath helped to develop as well as participate in thoughtful and innovative community collaboration and education models that also work to reduce racial disparities in prostate cancer outcomes

She has made it her life’s mission to fight against cancer as a scientist and to find a cure. As a provider of care she supports her patients diagnosed with cancer, their families. And to the communities KCI serves, she has said let’s work together to prevent cancer and to also provide education to the community.

She is a caregiver who works across the cancer continuum to do what is best for her patients and the community. She excels in leading and serving others, considering both the patient and community perspective, and in working to develop collaborative teams of scientists, physicians, nurses, and advocates to meet shared goals. This ensures the best possible cancer research, care and treatment is made available to all. She is an incredible advocate, who through her work, lifts those around her.