

WVOS President, Dr. John Azar, Gives Statement to Local Newspaper

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FAIRMONT — Dr. John Azar likes when his patients follow his advice, but he hopes they do not listen to the recommendation that women should wait until the age of 50 to get a mammogram.

In early November, an uproar occurred when the Preventive Services Task Force of the Department of Health and Human Services changed the recommended initial age for most women to begin getting mammograms from 40 to 50.

“To be blunt, I’m hoping women in the area ignore the recommendation at this point until there is more backing for it,” he said. “One of the recommendations is that they don’t think women should do self-exams. This is the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard. There is no evidence to back this up. How in the world can you get evidence to back it up? You cannot ask women not to do it and see if it makes a difference.”

Azar, an oncologist at Fairmont General Hospital, has gotten a reputation as a doctor who really cares about his patients.

William Yelich of Fairmont credits Azar with saving his life after Yelich was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma in 2001.

“He’s just an awesome doctor,” Yelich said. “All the chemo that everyone has to go through, the radiation and the chemo, to have a doctor that’s so compassionate and so caring makes all the difference.”

In fact, Yelich said, he believes he would have given up the fight if not for Azar’s encouragement.

“I was bound and determined not to go through it,” he said of the treatment that put him in remission nearly eight years ago. “Cancer has gotten my uncle, my grandfathers, my grandmother. I just thought, ‘What’s the point?’” Luckily for Yelich, Azar landed at Fairmont General in 1994 and decided to stay after he found he had an affinity for his patients.

It’s also lucky for Yelich that Azar became a doctor at all. He really wanted to become a teacher. Even after he got into medical school at the American University of Beirut in his native Lebanon, he had not made up his mind what to do. “When I was accepted into medical school, I almost turned it down,” Azar said. “My dad said and my uncle said, ‘You have an option to become a doctor and a teacher. If you go to med school, you keep the option open. If you don’t like it, you can be a teacher.’ Now I’m happy to be a physician. I still want to be a teacher at some point in my life.

“But it was somebody walking into the room and saying the right word to me and me becoming a physician.”

Once Azar decided to become a doctor, he chose a specialty fairly quickly after he became close with a teacher who was an oncologist.

“Most people don’t have a decision on a specialty then, but I decided early on to become an oncologist,” he said.

Coming to America was an obvious move for Azar, especially because of the university he attended in Lebanon.

“I wanted to continue my education in the American system,” he said. He did, first at the University of Maryland and Maryland General Hospital, where he became board certified in internal medicine, and then at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, where he did a fellowship in medical oncology.

Azar landed in the area via the Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center in Clarksburg, where he worked for a

couple of years in the early 1990s. Tony Alvaro, a Fairmont resident and then a board member of Fairmont General Hospital, asked him to interview at the hospital.

"I like my patients a lot," Azar said. "This is what has kept me going and wanting to stay here. I came from a different country and I could keep looking at my options every day. But I looked at my options when I had this relationship with patients and I decided this is where I am going to stay. I have patients for a few years and they become more than a patient."

As an oncologist, Azar described his role as being on the "front line" and as a "maestro" who coordinates a patient's care.

"We make treatment planning in conjunction with other specialties," he said. "We present cases in a multidisciplinary conference. Most of the time, the medical oncologist takes the lead on where the patient is going to go for surgery, radiation, chemotherapy."

Because of the high rate of smoking in West Virginia, lung cancer is a more common type of cancer that he sees, Azar said, in addition to colon and breast cancer and lymphoma, which is a blood disorder.

Azar also has done his share of work trying to make cancer treatment available to patients in rural areas without having to travel too far. He is the president of the West Virginia Oncology Society, a group that about 95 percent of the state's oncologists belong to. The group has been recognized by the American Society of Clinical Oncology, which featured the West Virginia Oncology Society on its Web site recently.

"We have grown so fast and there is so much interest in this program," Azar said.

Instead of traveling to the Mary Babb Randolph Cancer Center for clinical trials, patients who live farther away will have the opportunity to participate at a closer hospital through a cooperative net work.

"We are living in a rural area and the commute is hard and people have limited financial resources," Azar said. "It's hard to tell someone to go to (Johns) Hopkins or Pittsburgh. This way we can bring the clinical trials to the communities. It's a big program and we don't know if we can do it, but we are working hard to have a program with the university to bring the clinical trials to the communities."

Already, Azar has seen patients living longer from the improved drugs available these days.

"My dad died from cancer four or five years ago, and since then, there are two or three new drugs. If he was alive, he would have had a better chance and an improved quality of life. We are making progress, and a lot of progress."

In addition to the drugs and other medical treatment, Azar encourages patients to seek help from those who have gone through cancer treatment before them. He appreciates groups such as the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life.

"Some people are private and don't want to go to a support group, but for some, it helps a lot," Azar said.

