Knight News

Making radiation therapy less daunting for young cancer patients

The masks used during radiation therapy can be intimidating for anyone going through cancer treatment. For children, OHSU’s Department of Radiation Medicine is making the process a little easier with mask-decorating events that empower young patients.

Eight-year-old Regan Wright is well versed in radiation therapy. She was six when her family learned that a lump on her head was alveolar rhabdomyosarcoma, a type of cancer that grows in the body’s connective tissue. Since then, she has undergone chemotherapy, radiation and surgery as part of her treatment.

During radiation therapy, plastic mesh masks are molded to fit each patient’s face. When patients lie down, the masks are fastened to the bed to ensure the radiation targets the exact same spots each time. A Mr. Potato Head is used to demonstrate the process for new patients.

Wright’s care team plays music from Taylor Swift during her treatments to help put her at ease. When her father Donald Wright, was fitted for a mask during an event, the team was quick to also find a soundtrack for his experience.

“The fitting allowed me to experience one small part of what Regan’s been going through during treatment,” says Donald Wright.

Blair Murphy, M.D., a resident in the Department of Radiation Medicine in the OHSU School of Medicine, organizes and hosts the events. She received a grant from the OHSU Knight Cancer Institute to get the program started.

Murphy explains that patients’ parents were looking for an outlet to help their kids cope with the range of emotions and memories associated with the treatment masks.

“The decorated masks help take away some of the fear associated with radiation therapy,” says Murphy. “The act of decorating them gives patients some ownership and control over this part of their journey through cancer treatment.”

The events also provide an opportunity for patients and families to connect with each other and have some fun. The Children’s Healing Art Project of Portland and SCRAP PDX have provided an array of art supplies, and Baby Doll Pizza and Papa John’s Pizza have donated food for the events.

While some patients hold on to their masks once their treatment is complete, others destroy them. And some patients donate their masks to the department.

The Radiation Medicine Department proudly displays patients’ masks and works closely with the social work and child life specialists at Doernbecher Children’s Hospital to host mask demolition events too.

“We’ve received a lot of positive feedback from patients and families about the program,” says Murphy. “We’re thrilled to offer these events and look forward to expanding in the future.”
Visit the Department of Radiation Medicine's website to view photos from a past event.

Radiation therapy patient Sarah Cardona presents her newly decorated mask.

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