

Reimagining cancer in the workplace

Novartis is strongly committed in helping and supporting employees impacted by cancer through the program Ensemble – Caring for Colleagues (Ensemble).

Feb 04, 2020

“You have cancer.”

These three words have the power to alter the course of one’s life – whether they’re receiving the news, or divulging the information to a loved one. A cancer diagnosis can be difficult to process, and for many, the diagnosis and corresponding treatment plan will not be the sole consideration.

Cancer affects, and claims the lives of, people at a younger age than any other highly prevalent chronic disease – often while they are in the midst of their careers, supporting their families, raising children, and building toward their dreams and aspirations in life. In fact, cancer is the leading cause of disease-related death among working-age adults in high-income and middle-income countries such as the United States, Sweden, Canada, Chile, Argentina, Poland, and Turkey, stealing the most productive working years of a person’s life.¹ Cancer caregivers often have to quit their jobs or reduce their working hours in order to look after sick family members.

Understanding the devastating impact of cancer, and the reality that employees are struggling to work through it, Dawn Aubel, Director, Global Patient Relations, Novartis (and former oncology nurse), saw a unique need to help people navigate a diagnosis. Aubel initially developed a cancer screening program for Novartis employees, and the requests for additional support started flowing in. “It quickly became evident that more was needed,” she said.

The answer to those needs was the launch of Ensemble in 2014. The program provides a confidential network and community of support to Novartis associates who are impacted by cancer. The program caters to the needs of patients, survivors, caregivers, and managers, and the reception has been palpable – creating a culture of support for employees at some of the most vulnerable points in their lives.

Ensemble relies on the broad experience of Novartis employees, such as oncology experts and human resources personnel, who serve as internal volunteers. They’re tapped to provide health, emotional, and physical support to associates affected by cancer. Participants in the program will also benefit from peer-to-peer support. Additionally, Ensemble acts as a resource for colleagues of the affected associate, and can help guide them through how to best support them from a workload and managerial perspective.

“As a company, we make a huge commitment to the oncology community, and it was time to show that support to our own employees. Being in nursing and public health, I proposed a navigation model that formalized the support we were already giving employees, and made it more comprehensive. Today, we are bringing our mission to our employees and I couldn’t be prouder,” said Aubel.

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that support to our own employees.

To date, 75 countries have adopted the program, now spanning 14 languages. Building on its success, the program was renamed Ensemble-Caring for Colleagues in 2018 when the company ambition became to make it one global program. It has been expanded beyond oncology to include new therapeutic areas such as cardio-metabolic and neuroscience, with the hope to continue adding new areas as the program evolves.

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Vanessa Thirion-Cullity, Program lead of 'Ensemble – Caring for colleagues'

Vanessa Thirion-Cullity, Ensemble global program lead, is currently spearheading the charge to bring the program to as many employees around the globe as possible. "The employee response has been incredible. We receive feedback regularly that the program has really made a difference for our employees, and we're seeing more and more, those same employees wanting to give back by becoming a peer-to-peer volunteer in the program," said Thirion-Cullity.

The next evolution of the program is to continue to expand resources by partnering with third-party institutions, such as the current collaboration with Johns Hopkins Medicine for those in the United States. The partnership includes two dedicated nurse navigators, as well as a comprehensive navigation website, dedicated to Novartis associates to provide another layer of support for those seeking guidance.

Thirion-Cullity is proud of the program's growth and impact at Novartis, and hopes to see Ensemble set an example for other companies looking to support their colleagues impacted by cancer and other health conditions.

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"It is really quite extraordinary to have the support and commitment from Novartis to continue to foster this program and make it accessible to employees across the world. This is truly a unique offering in the industry, and something we hope all companies can use as the gold standard for supporting their workforce."

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This World Cancer Day, we're shining a light on our commitment to our employees impacted by cancer
#WCD2020

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1 The Lancet. Variations in common diseases, hospital admissions, and deaths in middle-aged adults in 21
countries from five continents (PURE): a prospective cohort study. 2019. Accessed
at [www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(19\)32007-0/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(19)32007-0/fulltext) on January 23, 2020.

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