

Thirteen Years and Still Growing: An AVAHO History

The Association of VA Hematology/Oncology (AVAHO) is now 13 years old, and we have much to celebrate! Like an adolescent, the organization has grown significantly over the past 13 years, and there is still a lot to learn and plenty of opportunities to grow. To understand where we are going, it is helpful to reflect on our past before looking ahead to a bright future.

It is true that in the 1980s the VHA hosted an annual cancer symposium. This forum was focused on veterans with cancer and provided a unique opportunity for VA health care professionals (HCPs) to meet. Lack of funding, strict rules, concerns over conflicts of interest eventually meant that the symposia could not continue. There was a dire need to fill the void, and VA HCPs were nostalgic.

Because of the VA's population of patients and structure, VA HCPs face unique challenges

provided logistic and legal support. Sue Lentz was employed as administrator.

The first official AVAHO inaugural meeting was held in Cincinnati, Ohio, on September 17, 2005, and the first executive committee consisted of Dr. Jazieh (president); Malek Safa, MD (vice president); Rami Komrokji, MD (secretary); and Zeina Nahleh, MD (treasurer).

A MATURATING ORGANIZATION

The society has grown over the past 13 years from fewer than 100 to a robust 630-member organization that provides a high-quality conference annually, including continuing medical education (CME) and non-CME sessions. Attendance at the annual conferences grew from 35 members in 2005 to nearly 400 in 2016. The first conference program lasted about 6 hours and included a business meeting and education and breakout sessions. Since 2005, the AVAHO meeting has expanded to 2 days to include CME and non-CME concurrent education sessions, special interest group breakout discussions, scientific posters, an exhibitor showcase, and networking opportunities. In addition, pharmaceutical company-sponsored satellite symposia have become very attractive to our members in the past 2 years and help support the organization's goals. Now it has become difficult to fit the growing agenda into 2 days.

From its inception, AVAHO has been interdisciplinary so that professionals from across the cancer care team could connect, share their expertise and experience, and develop new strategies for cancer care delivery and research. From Nashville to Portland, Atlanta to Omaha, Washington, DC, to Dallas, the annual conference location varies to facilitate attendance from all areas of the country.

The society also has been at the vanguard of promoting cutting-edge science, precision medicine, and fostering innovation in cancer care as can be seen in the pages that follow. In addition, AVAHO is committed to providing essential CME for all hematology and oncology professionals and opportunities for HCPs to network and collaborate.

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★ The AVAHO mission is to provide leadership in delivering quality comprehensive care to veterans with cancer.

and opportunities. The founders of AVAHO saw the benefits and positive influences that providing a platform for education, networking, and research opportunities would bring to VA care. The seed for AVAHO was planted in the summer of 2005 by a group of passionate hematology and oncology professionals working at the VHA, including Abdul-Rahman Jazieh, MD, MPH, who was professor of medicine in the division of hematology/medical oncology at the University of Cincinnati in Ohio. This group sought to implement a forum for interaction among VA hematology/oncology professionals across the nation with the simple goal of providing the best care possible to our nation's veterans facing cancer. Dr. Jazieh, developed a partnership that joined VA HCPs; the pharmaceutical industry (including Celgene's Jackie Rychel), which provided financial support; and workforce Strategies (Tammy Pritchard); which

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Beginning in 2012, AVAHO forged a strategic relationship with *Federal Practitioner*, and that relationship has grown to include the publication of AVAHO abstracts and a series of special issues focused on hematology and oncology—including this one.

A UNIQUE ORGANIZATION

AVAHO is unique. We are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that is volunteer-led and managed with the support of a single paid staff member. This is the only professional association where all disciplines of hematology oncology professionals meet with only one focus—care of veterans with cancer.

The AVAHO mission is to provide leadership in delivering quality comprehensive care to veterans with cancer; education for members to improve the quality of cancer care for veterans; a mechanism for networking among members to gain knowledge and best practices from the experiences of colleagues; and a venue to explore and facilitate new multidisciplinary research. One priority has been to continually increase the benefits of being an AVAHO member. Members have access to a variety of resources to keep current with trends in cancer care as well as to low-cost continuing education credits that are essential for licensure across disciplines.

The education AVAHO provides is focused on the unique nature of providing “the best care,

anywhere” inside the VHA system. In addition, AVAHO continues to help minimize the costs associated with travel to the conference site, cost of stay, some of the associated meals provided in part by AVAHO. As members, HCPs also have the opportunity to raise issues and concerns and share successes and almost-successes, and support career development of professional peers.

Last year, AVAHO announced its first scholarship, a \$10,000 research scholarship to a young investigator. Anyone who completed education and/or training within the past 10 years and has a minimum 5/8ths appointment at a VA facility can apply for these funds.

The teen years are not always easy but offer great promise. Over the past 13 years, AVAHO has grown significantly as an organization and continues to offer more opportunities for education, research, and networking, all with the hope of improving the quality of care for veterans with cancer and increasing support for their caregivers.

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