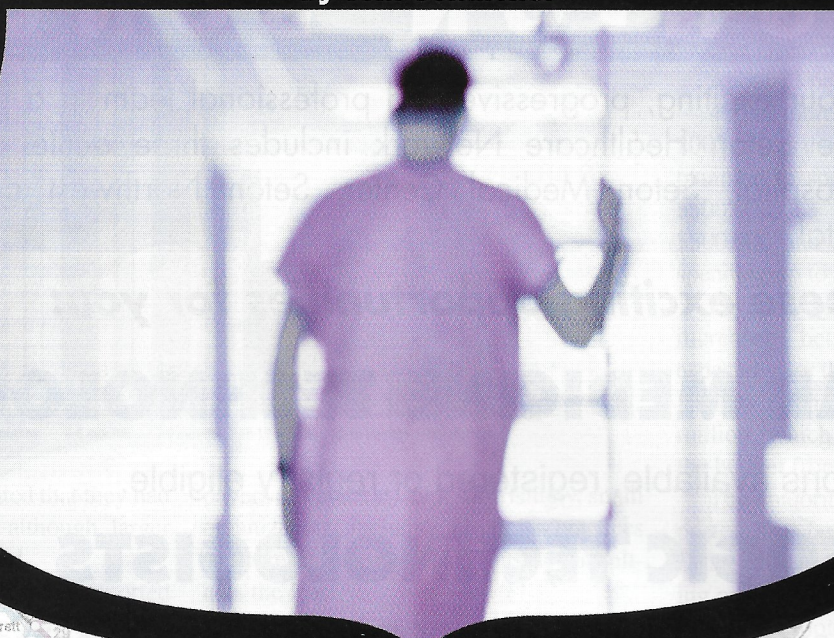


The Road to Wellness

Educating patients on the side effects
of cancer treatments

By Tom Schaffner



As cancer patients undergo radiation treatments, dealing with the physical side effects, such as skin irritation and nausea, is just part of the emotional roller coaster they must endure. Mental factors such as stress, depression and fear of the unknown can play an equally important role in the emotional despair of the patient.

To provide additional support for their patients, some medical facilities include wellness programs, which generally focus on promotion of health education to improve the individual's well being.

Francine Halberg, MD, radiation oncologist at the Marin Cancer Institute in Greenbra, Calif., says her facility's

involvement in a wellness program is a team effort. "There's no hierarchical structure among physicians and therapists when it comes to patient care. The flow diagram in our cancer institute has the patient at the center," she says. "When patients come into our center, we try to make it easier for them by creating an atmosphere that doesn't feel hospital-like, but feels very welcoming."

Before patients even come to the institute, she says, they're given written information often tailored to their diagnosis that prepares them for potential side effects. They are also introduced to the various health and healing programs that are offered and encouraged to investigate them further before they even step foot into the facility.

RESEARCH FIRST

The first and possibly most important of the wellness programs that patients usually take advantage of at Marin is the cancer library. A librarian is available to help patients with tailored Internet searches to get information on specific cancers, side effects, treatments and any other information that will help patients get through the treatment, Halberg says. Patients may also get an introduction to the library through the various support groups that convene there.

The library also provides information about other parts of the wellness program, such as guided imagery. Halberg says that this self-relaxation skill can be a very good management tool to cope with a number of cancer treatment side effects, whether it's pain, nausea or anxiety. Patients who use guided imagery often recommend it to new patients.

GOOD COMMUNICATIONS

"The key component to taking good care of somebody is communicating well with them," Halberg says. "The first thing I try to do is give patients a very clear idea of what to expect. If you know what side effects are coming and that people can help you with them, your anxiety is much less.

"I think that the raw fear that people often feel as part of the cancer diagnosis is one of the hardest things for the patients and their families," she says. "There are a number of other difficult side effects, but that is certainly one that you run into first."

Halberg says that one of the best approaches to easing patient anxiety is to give them the opportunity to talk directly about their fears and concerns. With the problem out in the open, it is easier to address the issues and find possible solutions. "The best way to counteract fear is with information," she explains.

FOLLOW-THROUGH

Halberg says that follow-through is key to good patient/therapist communication. "Not only is it important for patients to know what to expect early on, but ongoing communications are essential. If [radiation] therapists are extremely busy, burned out or may not have time to deal with the side effects, they can make sure that patients are referred to the nurses



Photo courtesy of Marin General Hospital

The Marin Cancer Institute's Meditation Garden allows cancer patients to escape the hospital-like settings of most medical facilities.

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or physicians, depending on how the individual department works."

The therapists can also have people on their team deal with the patients. After a patient's problem is identified, a team member can ask the patient specific questions, making the patient feel like someone is listening to them. In some cases, a patient who suffers from nausea could be given some Compazine, and never receive a thorough follow-through on the side effect.

Halberg believes that it is important for each facility to have a set of procedures or protocols for side effect management. "Every disease site should have a set of procedures and protocols on how we manage side effects, such as oral care for head and neck cancer patients," she says. "Everyone in the department needs to understand what happens when people start developing side effects, what steps can be taken and how to intervene early. I think that makes a big difference."

Halberg notes that in addition to the regular team of physicians, nurses and

Beyond Support Groups

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therapists, the institute also has specialists available to help patients with any tough or uncontrollable side effects. In cases like these, she says, the specialists are better equipped to assist the patients with their needs.

“The bottom line is that we want to help people manage their side effects as easily as possible,” she says. “And if you can reduce the anxiety around the patient, it sometimes reduces the magnitude of the side effect itself.”

— Tom Schaffner is the editor of RT Image. Comments on this article are encouraged and can be directed to tschaffner@valleyforgepress.com.



At the Continuum Cancer Centers of New York, the director of cancer supportive services, Stewart Fleishman, MD, says his program is a radical approach that goes way beyond regular support groups.

“[The program] provides the level of symptom management that most people get in hospice, but doing it for patients early in the disease,” Fleishman says. The service focuses on patients that are likely to get better, he says, because those patients don’t get much supportive care. “They have really been a neglected population.”

Fleishman says that his patients are given a one-page assessment survey that tries to determine how distressed a person is and what distresses the individual.

“The survey includes the most likely things that happen during treatment,” he says. “It includes radiation side effects, chemotherapy side effects and post-operative side effects.” Patients fill out the survey during periodic visits. A nurse then reviews the form for any previously undisclosed or recurring problems, and decides on the proper course of action. Problems include skin irritations, fatigue, pain, nausea, fear, anxiety and change in appearance. Fleishman says that this survey fits in with the centers’ approach to manage pain and other side effects of cancer treatments early on.

In addition to physical problems that may cause a patient stress, the survey covers other concerns as well: practical (e.g., housing, insurance), family (e.g., dealing with a partner or children), emotional (e.g., depression, nervousness) and spiritual/religious (e.g., relating to God and loss of faith). Fleishman says that the center employs chaplains, social workers, a nutritionist and physical therapists in order to anticipate various distresses and act on them as early as possible.

“It seems that people can be a little more candid on the written survey than they can be in person,” Fleishman says. “The physician asks the patients how they are doing and the reply is often, ‘I’m fine.’” Many times patients would rather tell their physicians that nothing is wrong than bother the medical personnel or be labeled a troublemaker. “The survey is another way to get information directly from the patient in a way that isn’t so intrusive and lets them be a little more candid.”

The center also houses a boutique that sells cancer-related products, such as metal-free deodorants for breast cancer patients or creams for skin irritations.

Among the wellness programs that the center offers is a yoga class for women with breast cancer. After the class, the participants gather in a circle to talk more like a traditional support group. “Each of the activities is associated with various supportive work,” Fleishman says.

The center also rents pool time at the local YWCA exclusively for the use of its cancer patients. “It’s good for the women that have had breast surgery or other surgeries so they don’t have to undress in front of others,” he says. A water aerobics program allows treated cancer patients to limber up a lot easier than they normally would.

For the men, the center offers an ongoing prostate program, which Fleishman describes as “partly education, partly support.”

“Men don’t generally share as much as the women and as quickly, so we [work] around the topic,” he says. Generally, a speaker will talk to the group and try to get the men to open up under the guise of an educational program that discusses a topic.

— T.S.