

A Model Cancer Wellness Program

Exercise and art in cancer survivorship

by Amy Litterini, PT, DPT

I had a vision in my mind of the defined components of a comprehensive cancer center. If you choose to engage in cancer care, you certainly need state-of-the-art treatment modalities for medical oncology and radiation oncology, and a formal research program; but I wanted something more. I wanted to actively engage our patients and their families at perhaps the most difficult time in their lives and help them with their individual journey. What we accomplished—with this framework and this vision—was the Cancer Wellness Program.

Mary Palmer, RN, MBA
Vice President of Cancer Care Services
at Exeter Hospital

Exeter Hospital is a 100-bed facility on the seacoast of New Hampshire recognized by the American College of Surgeons Commission on Cancer as a Comprehensive Community Cancer Center. Since 1980, medical oncology care has been provided at the Center for Cancer Care at Exeter Hospital by New Hampshire Oncology Hematology, PA, and in 2004, services expanded to include radiation oncology. In 2002, the Center for Cancer Care added the Cancer Wellness program to provide a wide variety of comprehensive support programs that offer individual and group services to help patients manage cancer and treatment-related side effects.

The Wellness Program's core services are traditional counseling, nutrition, and rehabilitative care, which include the Cancer Well-fit™ exercise program and such integrative oncology services as yoga, massage, and Reiki. Support groups are offered for individuals, couples, gender-specific survivor groups, and for those with metastatic disease. Supportive programs in the creative arts include art therapy, journaling, and individual and group art instruction. Other specialized programming includes pet visitation, *Look Good...Feel Better*, a weight management program, and an outdoor ropes course offered in collaboration with the University of New Hampshire.

The Art of Wellness

Exeter Hospital's slogan, *The Art of Wellness*, is a perfect fit for the Wellness Program at the Center for Cancer Care where a resident artist and an art therapist, both master's prepared, provide an array of creative support programs for patients and their loved ones throughout their cancer journey.

Lori Nathan, ATR, the cancer center's art therapist since 2002, offers group art therapy for adult survivors, a family art program for the children and grandchildren of patients, and a writing program.

Kathleen Robbins, MFA, joined the Cancer Center's Wellness Program as resident artist in 2006. She provides a weekly healing arts class, taught in

Resident artist Kathleen Robbins (on right) offers one-on-one art instruction to a patient in the cancer center's infusion area.



a traditional classroom setting, as well as one-on-one art instruction in the infusion area from the rolling art cart she created. Patients start with a demonstration on the basics with all the materials provided, and then the patient is set up to paint with a mentor. Over the past few months, the one-on-one art sessions have expanded as more survivors have expressed interest in learning basic watercolor technique. Patients have been painting apples, flowers, and landscapes from photographs while receiving their infusions in the medical oncology clinic. In addition to the traditional arts, patients have also enjoyed making cards and scrapbooking.

Robbins also teaches a traditional art class that meets weekly in the cancer center's conference room and involves a group of survivors. The class explores a variety of techniques and materials from acrylic painting to charcoal drawing and mixed media exercises that include collage and assemblage. Participants work from nature as well as their imagination and enjoy exploring and discussing their unique individual expressions. The class goal is to let the creative process become the springboard for the emotional, spiritual, and creative growth of the individual while also encompassing a support group activity.

Hundreds of patients have participated in creative art services since the Cancer Center's art program was initiated in 2000 as a pilot project. In fiscal year 2007 alone, 98 new participants were provided services. Artwork created by the participants has been exhibited in the hospital and at local libraries and galleries. Permanent art displays are on view in both the Cancer Center and the Synergy Health & Fitness Center, which is located on the hospital campus. The Cancer Center's new patient orientation manual, new patient educational DVD, and the program's quarterly *Wellness* newsletter also feature patient artwork. All art programs are free of charge to patients. The cost of staffing and supplies is included in the Cancer Center's annual operational budget. Additional funds for special art projects have been made available by generous donations from local fundraisers.

Cancer Well-fit™

Synergy Health & Fitness Center (Synergy) on Exeter Hospital's campus has hosted the Center for Cancer Care's Cancer Well-fit™ exercise program since its inception in 2002. Synergy, a 40,000-square-foot, hospital-based community health club built in 1998 with an average of 4,000 members, is also home to outpatient physical therapy services for oncology care and lymphedema management.

Cancer Well-fit™ is a free, twice-weekly program lasting 20-weeks, or for the duration of cancer treatment, whichever is longer. The program is designed to help manage the physical and emotional side effects of cancer treatment for survivors within one year of diagnosis. To date, the Well-fit™ program has served more



The Well-Fit™ staff (top row from left) Tammy Mazur, BS; Patti Bartlett (seated center); Amy Litterini, PT, DPT; Christine Bucu, BS, and Chuck Memmesheimer, PTA, (bottom, left).

than 1,000 cancer survivors from the community.

The Cancer Well-fit™ program is staffed by a physical therapist, who is employed by the Cancer Center, and eight oncology-trained personal trainers (employed by Synergy). These personal trainers supervise 10 individual classes per week for 50-75 patients per day twice weekly. In addition to traditional exercise, the Cancer Center also offers yoga with the goals of relaxation and improved posture, breathing technique, and flexibility. Two yoga classes, taught by oncology-trained yoga instructors, are provided each week.

Cancer Well-fit™ participants receive an individualized exercise program consisting of cardiovascular, strength training, and flexibility exercises, offering a comprehensive approach to fitness. Participants are assessed by a doctoral-prepared oncology physical therapist before starting their exercise program, and a group of oncology-trained personal trainers assist them with proper set up, technique, and progression of their exercise program.

As fatigue is one of the most common complaints in cancer survivorship, the Cancer Well-fit™ program was initiated to help patients reduce fatigue and maintain strength and endurance while undergoing treatment. Research has routinely demonstrated benefits from exercise on cancer related fatigue, as did the cancer center's own 2007 study of 200 heterogeneous participants.¹ Other statistically significant benefits for study participants overall included increased grip and lower extremity strength, and improved quality of life. The program is planning additional research studies to examine the benefits of exercise in patients with Stage IV cancer.

Training the Trainers

Most rehabilitation and fitness professionals do not learn oncology principles during their core training curriculum; therefore, oncology education is a requirement for individuals interested in initiating a cancer exercise program. In 2001, Exeter Hospital initiated an internal two-day mandatory training curriculum for our rehabilitation and fitness professionals involved in cancer care. The curriculum includes basic and advanced lectures from physicians, nurses, social workers, therapists and other oncol-

Just Getting Started?

Once a community cancer center decides to develop comprehensive survivorship services, the first steps are to establish a framework for goal setting and a timeline, keeping its mission and vision in mind. Community cancer centers should also consider conducting site visits and benchmarking against other longstanding successful programs. Consider the format that best fits your organization and seek similarly sized programs to emulate. For example, before starting our exercise program, three staff members (the director of Cancer Wellness Services, the cancer center director, and the vice president of oncology) traveled to Santa Barbara, Calif., to look at the original Cancer Well-fit™ program at the Santa Barbara Athletic Club. On our return, we spent six months designing our exercise program to enhance our existing oncology rehabilitation program by meeting our clinical and medical setting needs, developing our policies and procedures, and establishing an educational plan.

Community cancer centers should develop individual processes and procedures in order to customize the program to their specific needs—budget, patient population and volume, available space, staffing, and expertise.

ogy professionals in order to provide a solid foundation for our staff. Topics include medical oncology, radiation oncology, pathology, radiology, surgery, and end-of-life care. Special topics have included lymphedema, pain management, yoga, oncology massage, and spirituality. Today, this annual program is attended by an average of 75 professionals from regional facilities throughout New England, and educational offerings have expanded to include hosting site visits and providing onsite training consulting for other facilities.

Program Costs

The Cancer Well-fit™ Program at Exeter Hospital is free to any patients from the community regardless of where they receive their treatment. Patients outside of our system are referred to us by their friends, family, and/or physicians. All patients are required to have medical clearance prior to initiating the program. Originally, the program was funded, as a pilot project, by a \$25,000 grant from the Exeter Hospital Associates. Today the expenses for the program are included in the operational budget of the Cancer Center. The annual contract with Synergy includes monthly payments for space rental, equipment usage, and an hourly group fitness rate for the personal training staff. This partnership has historically benefited Synergy as many of the program's participants go on to become regular members of the health club.

Since this type of exercise programming mimics the widely accepted and often reimbursable phase II-III cardiac rehabilitation model, insurance companies should begin to consider similar reimbursement structures for the oncology patient population. More research is needed to demonstrate the efficacy of exercise programs on outcomes such as return to work and performance of activities of daily living.

In spite of the fact that the wellness programs do not

generate revenue directly, the benefits demonstrated by the programs far out-weigh the financial risks. Many patients have chosen to receive their cancer care at Exeter Hospital, or have transferred their care to Exeter Hospital, based on the availability of its extensive support programming or the recommendation of former patients. In addition, the oncologists and surgeons feel these services assist their patients significantly in the process of completing and recovering from cancer treatment, which can often be debilitating.

Programs seeking funding should investigate grant opportunities that may be available. Other sources of funding may include a fee-for-service format or a local, facility-specific fundraiser such as an annual walk, bike race, or 5-10K races. Once funding, staffing, and target population are established, staff education is the next critical step.

Community cancer centers affiliated with a rehabilitation department should consider collaboration. Such a partnership offers the highest level of expertise for patient assessment and individualized exercise prescription. In addition, this medically-based model allows for the safe management of patients with complex medical histories and various diagnoses and stages of disease. The partnership extends throughout the patient's cancer experience including preventative, restorative, supportive, and palliative phases of rehabilitation and includes specialized services such as lymphedema management and palliative care. It also allows for a more seamless transition between levels of care such as from hospitalization to home health care and ultimately to outpatient services and vice versa. Once discharged from physical therapy and/or the Cancer Well-fit™ exercise program, many of our patients become members of the fitness center in order to continue their exercise program.

“There is increasing evidence that exercise not only benefits patients from the perspective of their well-being, it also appears to have an effect on reducing cancer recurrence rates and improving survival,” said medical oncologist, Danny Sims, MD.

Survivorship is now possible for a greater number of individuals diagnosed with cancer than ever before, and many patients with advanced disease have treatment options well beyond first-line therapy. Management of disease and treatment-related side effects has become an important focus in quality oncology care. With carefully planned and implemented wellness programming, community cancer centers can expand and enhance the supportive component of the care they provide.

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References

¹Litterini A, Fieler V. (2007). The change in fatigue, strength, and quality of life following an exercise program for a heterogeneous group of individuals with cancer: A Final Analysis. Poster presentation. Northern New England Clinical Oncology Society Annual Meeting, Burlington, VT; October, 2007.