

## More Than Beauty: Meeting Patients' Aesthetic Needs

BY MARY VOROUS AND DEBBIE DENITTO



Survivorship support programs are a crucial element of comprehensive cancer care. Without them, patients currently in treatment or post-treatment may face unexpected physical and psychological challenges without professional support. As the manager of Wellspring, a cancer resource center located just two miles from Valley Health Cancer Center at Winchester Medical Center in Virginia, I understand the importance of providing holistic care that meets the body, mind, and spiritual needs of our patients. Wellspring is a support service of the cancer center, which is funded by the Valley Health Oncology Service Line and the Winchester Medical Center Foundation. We offer our patients with cancer and other chronic illnesses services such as:

- A hair salon
- Wig fitting
- Natural manicure and pedicure services
- Lymphedema sleeves
- Compression stockings
- Herbal foot baths
- Post-surgical camisoles
- Meeting space for support groups.

For services not covered by insurance, we are able to offer some free of charge and others at reduced cost.

In addition to working as Wellspring's business manager, I am a licensed cosmetologist and hairdresser. I have been a hairdresser for almost 40 years, and through this experience I wanted to bring to Wellspring a personal, customized service to help patients address the aesthetic side

effects of their cancer therapies. Of course, aesthetic processes are just one part of the complex puzzle of healing from cancer treatments; there are psychosocial, nutritional, and physical needs as well. Yet, the aesthetic ramifications of cancer treatment are often overlooked.

Nurturing self-esteem is empowering to a patient, and this was our mission when developing the More Than Beauty program in 2018 as part of Valley Health Cancer Center's support services. Before this program, patients with cancer receiving care at Valley Health did not have a secure or comfortable place to go to when it came to their personal care. More Than Beauty fills this gap in care by offering patients with cancer a monthly two-hour class focusing on hair, skin, and nail care while in treatment or post-treatment, as well as mindfulness, exercise tips, and education about the benefits of good nutrition. These services allow us to nurture patients' self-esteem and help them to regain a sense of control.

The More Than Beauty class is held in a safe and private space for patients. Here they experience salon or spa services without feeling isolated from other patrons who may not share the same concerns as patients with cancer or other chronic disease. We transformed the classroom space to model a salon, with 12 beauty stations made up of removable tables and mirrors, fully equipped with water and natural products. Because of COVID-19, our class took a six-month hiatus. We plan to start up More Than Beauty again in 2021

with a reduced number of salon stations, practicing the same safety protocols as our hospital system.

Three staff cosmetologists lead the monthly More Than Beauty class, now in its third year. Their services are paid through support from the Valley Health Oncology Service Line and Winchester Medical Center Foundation. These licensed professionals provide personal consultations and share basic information about how to treat damage to the skin, nails, and hair that can result from cancer treatment.

The cosmetologists begin each class with guided meditation, pressure point therapy for the face and neck, and breathing techniques to relieve tension and stress. Once patients are relaxed, cosmetologists meet with them individually for a personal consultation. Patients share what medications they take and any side effects they are experiencing. The cosmetologists then speak with patients about what types of medication can cause aesthetic side effects to the hair, skin, and nails and how to best treat them. Wellspring staff communicates

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regularly with Valley Health Cancer Center's clinical staff, so cosmetologists stay apprised and up to date on cancer therapy-related side effects.

Common hair-related patient concerns include scalp irritation and the death of hair follicles during chemotherapy. In response, Wellspring's licensed cosmetologists teach patients anti-inflammatory and anti-bacterial best practices for scalp treatment. This education treats the whole patient—inside and out. Cosmetologists also walk patients through a sample skin care regimen, share light makeup and skin care tips, and discuss how natural products can help reduce the risk of infection and inflammation.

It is important for patients with cancer to understand that they should use natural products because of an increased risk of infection and inflammation in the body. Chemical products with acetone should be avoided, as well as acrylic nails. The cosmetologists provide education on eyebrow waxing and treatment, how to care for eyelashes and lips, and how to avoid possible irritants, endocrine disrupters, and toxins.

After the aesthetic portion of the class is over, Valley Health Cancer Center serves patients a light lunch, during which a nutritionist speaks about the importance of nutritional health. During the class, an oncology nurse navigator or wellness trainer—both Valley Health employees—speaks with patients about the cancer center's other available resources. "The goal of this program is for people to feel whole again and feel better about themselves," explains Debra DeNitto, community outreach coordinator at Valley Health Cancer Center.

Each More Than Beauty class closes with a poetic reading and an evaluation of services. Since program inception, we have only received positive feedback. Patients say they have found the class to be incredibly informative and that it helps them feel less stressed and more educated about how to care for their bodies.

To further help aesthetic professionals like cosmetologists and hairdressers support patients, in 2019 Wellspring staff received certification from SkyMD's *Eyes on Cancer*

program ([eyesoncancer.org](http://eyesoncancer.org)). This program teaches aesthetic workers to spot early signs of skin cancer. After this training, aesthetic workers alert their clients to any unusual skin features and suggest that the clients follow up with their physician or dermatologist.

Wellspring continues to evolve and meet the needs of its patients through a new certification from Oncology Spa Solutions®, an approved provider of the National Coalition of Estheticians Association's commission on accreditation in oncology esthetics. Wellspring has also recently hired a coordinator of integrative care. This professional is readily available to support all patients with cancer when they walk through the door. 

*Mary Vorous is supervisor at Wellspring, the cancer resource center of Valley Health Cancer Center at Winchester Medical Center in Winchester, Va. Now retired, Debbie DeNitto was the oncology community outreach coordinator at Valley Health Cancer Center in Winchester, Va.*

