



Place...of Wellness

Reiki at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center

BY JERI MILLS, M.D.

Since the release of my book, I have received numerous letters and e-mails from people who would like to start Reiki programs in their local hospitals. In most cases they have already made a phone call or sent a letter extolling the virtues of Reiki to the hospital administrator, and have offered to start a Reiki program in the hospital. If the request was denied, the person became frustrated, assumed there was a closed minded attitude at the local institution and gave up. I believe that by describing

the long, complicated process that ultimately led to the introduction of Reiki at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center I can help people to understand how these programs evolve in most large institutions. I hope this information will give them the confidence and the fortitude to move through the channels that will allow them to bring Reiki into their local hospitals.

With its 12,000 staff members and tens of thousands of patients per year, University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas is more like a small city

than a hospital. For decades, the state funded institution has been a forerunner in cancer care. Treating patients from all over the world, M.D. Anderson has achieved remarkable remission and cure rates, frequently in patients for whom other facilities have offered no hope.

With the availability of extensive social work, support groups and clergy, M.D. Anderson was already doing a great deal to provide emotional and spiritual support for their patients and families, but in 1991, realizing the importance of wellness of the spirit to the overall healing process, they decided to offer more.

Initially a few complementary therapy programs, lectures on meditation, guided imagery, stress management, and herbs and supplements were offered as breakout sessions at the third annual Living Fully with Cancer Conference presented by the Anderson Network. The conference was drawing from 700 to 900 people each year. The new complementary therapy programs were so popular the facility was unable to accommodate all the people who wanted to participate. Their overwhelming success led Judy Gerner, then Director of Anderson Network Patient Services, to consider offering such programs on a more regular basis. In 1995 the idea to create an integrative medicine facility at M.D. Anderson was conceived.

It took almost three years and the combined efforts of Judy, a multi-disciplinary steering committee of experts representing Physical Therapy, Psychiatry, Social Work and Chaplaincy, and hospital administrators to create a resource where all programs focusing on quality of life issues could be reviewed. This intercommunication meant that there would not be a duplication of services and also assured that all programs would conform to the stringent standards of M.D. Anderson.

The proposed complementary therapy clinic would make all its programs available, free of charge, to all people with a past or present cancer experience and persons in their support system, whether they received their medical care at M.D. Anderson or elsewhere. It would be made very clear, however, that these programs

were all designed to be an adjunct to traditional medical care, never a substitute.

M.D. Anderson agreed to provide start up funds and to continue to provide maintenance support for the new facility, but the program would rely heavily on donations. Community response to the complementary therapy program has been enthusiastic as we can see from the story behind one recent donation. After a high school student succumbed to cancer, his classmates put on a huge fund raising event in memory of their lost friend and elected to donate all the proceeds to the program.

In 1998 M.D. Anderson's new complementary therapy clinic, Place...of wellness, opened its doors for the first time. About seventy people took part in the sixteen programs that were offered the first month. Programs were added as funding and space permitted. By the end of the first year there were over 100 program opportunities reaching as many as 700 participants per month. Programs were designed to support the body, mind and spirit. They range from support groups to movement classes, relaxation and meditation classes, introduction to the healing arts, and expressive arts. The majority of the classes are presented within the Place...of wellness facility, while others are beginning to reach out to clinics and bedside. Regular special events are also offered to include the hospital staff and volunteers in an effort to increase awareness of Place...of wellness.

Standard guidelines have been developed for any person wishing to facilitate a program at Place...of wellness. The person must complete a program and facilitator application, and meet with committees and staff members to make sure their program is in keeping with the facility's mission statement: To provide an environment where all persons touched by cancer may enhance their quality of life through programs to complement medical care and focus on the body, mind, and spirit.

The first energy based modality came into the program in 1998 with the introduction of Tai Chi and later Chi Gong classes, ancient arts that teach the participant to align and balance the flow of chi

or life force energy in her own body.

In 2001, extensive patient interest in energy work led to the introduction of three more classes at Place...of wellness. Reiki Master Mike Powers began teaching a one-hour introduction to Reiki once a month and two nurses began teaching Introduction to Healing Touch classes. Place...of wellness did not offer individual energy sessions at that time, but they knew that many patients were seeking practitioners on their own. The purpose of the classes was to describe the two forms of energy work and to explain what results could realistically be expected from them.

"Sometimes people have unrealistic expectations about energy work," Mike told me. "They're looking for a magic bullet. I feel that part of my job is to dispel the myths and create more realistic expectations for the patients. If they expect a miraculous cure after one session and are disappointed, they often get frustrated and give up on energy work all together. If they go into it without any major expectations and something really great happens, then everyone's happy."

"Most people who come to see me, people who are dealing with advanced cancer, don't come seeking a miracle cure. They're just looking for something to improve their quality of life. They're most concerned about the little things: a sore elbow, an aching back..."

Mike continued, "One of my most dramatic healing sessions involved a man who, for years, had been totally resistant to energy work. John, a 60-year-old retired plumber with stage four cancer, had been coming to me twice a week for about two years for Tai Chi classes in my private practice. On several occasions, I offered him Reiki, but he always refused. John grew up at a time when it was unacceptable for one man to put his hands on another when they're alone in a room together.

"One day John arrived for his Tai Chi class in such terrible shape that I'm not sure how he even made it to my house. He'd just started Interferon treatments and was having terrible side effects. He was so disoriented he couldn't even complete a single sentence, and what he did

say was quite incoherent. He was also having chest pain and a lot of pain from a huge blood clot in one leg.

"He could just barely stand; I don't know how he expected to do Tai Chi. I told him I thought he needed to get on the table for a Reiki session. Instead of his usual refusal, this time, he didn't hesitate; he just climbed on the table.

"About 90 minutes later, he got off the table a different man. He was completely pain free. His speech was coherent again and his voice was about three decibels lower than usual. It was an amazing transformation. None of his illness had gone away. He still had stage four cancer and a blood clot in his leg, but he felt better. He's only been on the table two more times in the last six months. He seems to have to be really sick before he'll accept a Reiki session, but when he gets off the table he's always a lot better."

I asked Mike if he thought the man might be more open to self-treatment. "I tried to get him to learn Reiki, but he's just not interested," Mike answered. "I did teach his girl friend, and I think she gives him treatments at home once in a while."

When I asked Mike if he'd like to tell me about any other particularly rewarding patient experiences he replied, "I really like working with other health care professionals. I find that a lot of them are interested, but are not willing to risk their reputations to learn more about energy work. Once they're exposed to it, it's a different story.

"I had a patient a few years ago, a doctor from Mexico City, who attended one of my Tai Chi classes. At the end he told me, 'As a doctor and a scientist, I don't believe in any of this. But now that I'm a patient, I feel I should try everything. And you know, I think it works.'"

On March 3, 2003 Place...of wellness began to offer treatments in several modalities of energy therapy in a program they call Relaxation Touch Therapy. Participants are required to attend a one-hour introduction to Reiki or Healing Touch lecture in order to understand what to expect from energy work prior to requesting a session. Unless they request a specific energy modality, the volunteer on

call that day is asked to provide a session in what ever modality she practices.

The ten volunteers who provide the sessions may be Reiki, Healing Touch, Jin Shin Jyutsu or Sat Nam Rasayan practitioners. They must all be certified in the modality they practice. Only those volunteers holding a license in a field that includes touch in its scope of practice, like massage therapists and RN's, are permitted to do hands-on sessions. The other volunteers work off-body, in the patient's etheric field. The issue of whether or not it is acceptable to allow lay practitioners to touch patients has also been a major consideration at other hospitals I have contacted where Reiki programs are being developed. In many states, becoming an ordained minister gives people the right to touch for healing purposes, but extensive research by Place...of wellness staff was not able to discover the existence of such a law in the state of Texas.

Reiki Master Deanna Cuello, Program Coordinator at Place...of wellness, was

one of the first to provide relaxation touch sessions. Accustomed to doing hands-on treatments, she said it felt a bit odd to be limited to off-body work, but the recipients seemed to appreciate the sessions. One participant she worked with came back at a later time and shared with her that the session helped her to relax and resulted in some lessening of physical discomfort.

Unlike modalities that patients are already more familiar with, like meditation and yoga, the Relaxation Touch Therapy program is taking off rather slowly. In the first three weeks, only five treatments were requested. The program is now three months old and is growing very slowly.

As a Reiki practitioner, I have to admit I was disappointed by the small numbers. I had hoped to hear that the program was such an overwhelming success that they were already seeking out more Reiki volunteers. But that is not the case, nor is it the reality in the majority of

medical institutions that have instituted Reiki programs. There is an important lesson to be learned from this experience: affecting change is rarely done in the blink of an eye. It takes dedication, perseverance and a willingness to work within the system to bring something new into a large institution.

The idea for Place...of wellness was conceived in 1995. Its doors opened in 1998. The first program-sponsored Reiki treatment was offered in 2003. It has taken a long time— more time most of us would be willing to dedicate to such a project— but, in the end, the seeds have been planted. Energy sessions are being offered in the facility. With continued dedication and the loving presence of Reiki energy, these seeds will have a chance to grow and blossom.



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