

## **Psychosocial care is a fundamental part of cancer care**

As the ranks of cancer survivors grow to more than 12 million in the US, there is growing concern about how these patients and families are dealing with the burden of a cancer diagnosis. There are an estimated 3,000 cancer survivors in Gallatin County, and if you are over the age of 30, you most likely know someone close to you who has been diagnosed with cancer. Over 5,000 people in Montana will be diagnosed with the disease, and an estimated 1,970 will die from it this year. Many people end up fighting cancer - either dealing with a current diagnosis, worrying about recurrence of past disease, or helping to care for a loved one with cancer. This is an all-too-common disease and as the saying goes, **“you are never more than three feet away from someone affected by cancer.”**

The health care community works hard to treat cancer – either to cure it or to put it into remission and improve the patient’s length and quality of life. The ability to screen for early detection, and treat the disease effectively has increased multi-fold in the past 5-10 years, therefore increasing the number of people in our community who are cancer survivors. We are also becoming more aware of how psychological health affects quality of life, and adherence to physical care. As a result, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) looked at how the health care system copes with cancer patients’ psychological and social problems, and how “psychosocial” care can be improved.

Psychosocial health care looks at the emotional side of getting a cancer diagnosis, as well as the life challenges that can prevent good healthcare and patients’ ability to take care of themselves. The recent IOM report encourages health care teams to guide patients toward support groups and other emotional support services. Cancer frequently brings on depression and anxiety disorders, and sometimes meets the textbook criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder. Patients suffering from depression, anxiety, or excessive stress can have difficulty remembering things, concentrating and making decisions, reducing quality of life and important relationships. Many of these feelings can be present in both the person with cancer, as well as their caregiver. When patients are able to address their psychosocial needs, their quality of life is greatly improved, and compliance with treatment is enhanced.

Support groups are one way to meet these emerging needs. A support group is a time for people who have a common circumstance to talk freely about their experience with cancer. This will be done with people who truly understand what they are going through and can give feedback on ways to improve their situation and coping skills. Many people think that support groups are a “real bummer” and “depressing”, and while it is true that tears may be shed, it is also frequent to hear much laughter as people are able to find humor in some of the things they are experiencing through their cancer journey.

Support groups are great for people going through treatment, but also for the time following treatment when life seems overwhelming and lonely. Many friends and family will go on with their lives, leaving the cancer patient feeling vulnerable and alone. Many times, people with cancer are expected to “pick up their lives and move on”, and yet are not ready to do so both physically and emotionally. The side effects of treatment can include pain, fatigue and inability to sleep. Being in a support group to address the special needs of a survivor will build a sense of community and worth, as they find their path to healing and recovery.

In Gallatin County, we are fortunate to have Cancer Support Community that offers support groups, as well as education and hope for people affected by cancer at no cost to the participants. We are also fortunate that the Bozeman Deaconess Cancer Center has teamed up with Cancer Support Community, allowing us to provide comprehensive cancer care in our area – without the need to travel. Support groups are available on a weekly basis and are utilized by many who have been diagnosed with cancer and their caregivers. After all, cancer treatment is intended to treat the physical part of cancer – to extend life – but also to improve *quality* of life as well. Our health care system is recognizing these needs, and is providing services to meet those needs. People affected by cancer – both the patient and their caregiver – deserve no less. An oncologist once said, “I did not save your life to have you be miserable”, and when people are able to address their emotional health in concert with their physical health, the outcomes are greatly enhanced.

If you would like a copy of the recent Institute of Medicine report, please contact Cancer Support Community at 582-1600.

Becky Franks

Executive Director of Cancer Support Community Montana