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GREAT IDEAS TO PREVENT  
ONCOLOGY STAFF BURNOUT

by Astara March

*Keeping members of the oncology team* from being overwhelmed by the stress of their jobs is a major concern in hospitals around the country. Although the burden of caring for people with cancer falls most heavily on doctors and nurses, the rest of the staff is affected as well. When patients are dying or switching from curative to palliative therapy, the distress of their caregivers trickles down to everyone in the clinic. When you add staffing shortages, funding cuts, and an aging population that will soon overburden even the best run centers, finding ways for the staff to let off steam and get their needs met becomes increasingly important.

Standard incentives are not enough. Awards, tuition reimbursement/CME support, funds to attend conferences and join professional organizations, sign-on bonuses, and higher salaries are no longer keeping staff members on board. Innovative workplaces are finding ways to reduce outside stress, such as offering day care and elder care or hiring personal service firms that allow staff members to take care of dry cleaning, car maintenance, and other time-consuming errands right at the hospital. (See "Strategic Planning for the Recruitment and Retention of Health Care Professionals" by Chris A. Roederer, M.A., in the September/October 2001 *Oncology Issues*.) Important as these measures are, it is the psychological supports a hospital offers its employees in high-stress positions, and the degree of mutual support within work groups, that often determine whether an individual will stay at a particular facility or in the field of oncology altogether.

*Oncology Issues* interviewed program administrators and nurses around the country to find out how they support the lives of their employees. We found a number of creative and innovative programs already in place.

### 1 Make a Joyful Noise

The University of Kansas Medical Center in Kansas City, Kans., gives its staff a performance venue with the Music in the Med program. Monthly noon-hour solo and small ensemble performances feature staff

members and community musicians playing any kind of music they like in the center auditorium.

### 2 Beat Retreat

The Hubert Humphrey Cancer Center at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis sponsors a Wellness Retreat for its staff at a local center called the Aveda Institute. Staff members go to Aveda over the weekend for a day of yoga, aromatherapy and essential oil treatments, and a full-body massage or facial free-of-charge.

### 3 A Place of Their Own

The nurses on the inpatient oncology unit at Methodist Medical Center in Oak Ridge, Tenn., asked for a respite area for themselves and patients' families, and the administration responded by converting an entire patient room on the ward. The new room has couches, a coffee and hot chocolate machine, and a prayer corner that features a covered table for books, a fountain, and nice pictures.

### 4 Time Out for a Song

The Lombardi Center at Georgetown University Medical Center in Washington, D.C., sponsors both a weekly performance series (held in Lombardi's atrium at noon) and "Time Out for a Song." Staff members join in group singing for half an hour or so every other Thursday, and sometimes entertain patients. The concert series features volunteer community performers who offer everything from dance recitals to classical string quartets and Japanese gamelan music. Players visit the infusion areas after the main concert is over. "On a tough clinic day, the music can be the only bright spot," said one staff member.

### 5 Tending to the Heart and Mind

Via Christi Regional Medical Center in Wichita, Kans., offers a two-hour evening class entitled "Consolation and Care for the Caregiver," which focuses on how staff can physically, emotionally, and spiritually care for themselves while caring for others.

Via Christi also has "critical incident" response teams of counselors and social workers that



**A pajama party at Shawnee Mission Cancer Center's Camp Bluebird.**

support staff throughout the hospital when a traumatic event takes place.

Claudio Ferraro, service line director for oncology at Via Christi, said a team recently supported the oncology staff when one of its nurses was shot and killed outside the hospital. "Caregivers don't have time to grieve," said Ferraro. "They have to go on giving, no matter what. The critical incident response workers were a great help to us."

## 6 Building Up the Coping Muscles

Cedars-Sinai Comprehensive Cancer Center in Los Angeles, Calif., has a unique Psychosocial Wellness Program for its caregivers that features support groups for nurses and a yearly curriculum of courses chosen by the staff. Requested topics have included boundary management, how to talk to patients about death and dying, how to recognize psychological problems in cancer patients, and stress management techniques. Tom Strouse, M.D., a psychiatrist and the program's director, said that staff members like groups that educate them about a subject and teach them coping skills in addition to offering support. He designs the courses towards these goals.

## 7 Rope Them In

One of the biggest problems staff support programs face is getting physicians to use their services.

If your physicians won't come to you, go to them. The Arts and Humanities program at the Lombardi Cancer Center takes art projects into the doctor's journal club (where the latest medical literature is reviewed) to help physicians get their feet wet, and several institutions were able to increase physician participation when they separated their yoga classes into staff and patient sessions.

## 8 A Pat on the Back

The Cancer Center of Shawnee Mission Medical Center in Shawnee Mission, Kans., shares positive comments from patient discharge summaries with the nurses mentioned and includes these comments in each nurse's annual review. Margie Jecker, Shawnee Mission's oncology manager, says she writes a lot of personal thank-you notes to staff members for helping with difficult patients or families, mentoring other staff members, or going the extra mile for a patient. She also recognizes staff members in the unit newsletter and issues gift certificates for extra hours or a job particularly well done. Shawnee Mission's nurses are actively encouraged to become involved in unit or hospital committees so they can "share their great ideas."

According to Ann Rydesky, a former employee of Emory University's Winship Cancer Center (who now works at Providence Alaska Medical Center in Anchorage), a mysterious gold statue appears on the desk of a Winship employee who is "noticed" doing something excellent. No one knows from whence it comes.

## 9 The Way to Their Hearts

On selected days at KU Med Center, a local firm called Chris Cakes sets up in the courtyard early in the morning and makes pancakes for all comers until mid-afternoon. Whenever the spirit moves them, the administrators load a mobile cart with candy and personally take it around the

hospital for the staff. In addition, KU Med Cancer Center has yearly chili cook-offs, ice cream socials, and luaus.

## 10 Sports

The metropolitan Kansas City area has a program called Corporate Challenge, which sponsors sports competitions between Kansas City companies and institutions to raise community spirit. KU Med Center sponsors Corporate Challenge teams for running, walking, soccer, swimming, baseball, racquetball, triathlon, and trap shooting. Kathy Ducey, director of clinical operations at the cancer center, who eschews athletic activity, goes to the events to cheer on her colleagues and says she has a lot of fun. When the medical director of the cancer center won a swimming medal last year, Ducey and the entire oncology staff basked in his reflected glory.

Located only a few hours from some of the best white water rivers in the country, Lombardi has organized white water rafting trips for the clinical and research staff. Each participant pays a share of the low group fee, and everyone carools down to the river.

## 11 Playing Together

"When things get too heavy around here, we try to lighten them up," said Lisa Chadwick, manager of the inpatient oncology unit at Oak Ridge. Successful forays into the light and lively have included a baby picture matching contest with prizes for the most correct guesses, and a pet photo board. In addition to having fun, Chadwick said people get to know their co-workers in a different light, which makes the care team closer and more cohesive.

The Lombardi clinic staff held cocktail parties every Friday at 5:30 p.m. in the pharmacy. Soon staff members were vying to make decorations and put on skits for their colleagues.

KU Med Center's Cancer Center sponsors trips to an amusement park, and the hospital obtains group seating for touring Broadway shows and professional sports events.

## 12 A Larger Embrace

The staff of Shawnee Mission Cancer Center wanted to support their patients outside of the hospital setting, and decided to incorporate a national program called Camp Bluebird. A getaway experience for former and current adult cancer patients, the camp runs for three days in the spring and fall, and nursing and volunteer staff members can serve as one-on-one counselors. Doctors and administrators often come out for the camp theme parties, which have included a biker night, a pajama party, family feud, fifties dress-up, and South of the border/wild West. Local entertainers (like the Wild Women of the West and Hallmark Cards' Maxine) perform at the party as well. The camp includes educational activities, craft projects, and horseback riding, and is advertised through local hospitals and doctors' offices. Between 25 and 35 campers usually participate. They pay \$50, and the rest of the cost is covered by the hospital's philanthropic arm, the Foundation for Shawnee Mission Medical Center.

## 13 The Joy of Self-Expression!

Providence Cancer Center at Providence Alaska Medical Center in Anchorage has a "Crazy Day" one Friday a

# How a Grant Can Help

**T**he Lombardi Cancer Center at Georgetown University Medical Center in Washington, D.C., offers its staff and patients a lively arts program that includes quilting, tapestry, clay, paper stained glass, collage, and artist books. Professional artists and volunteers teach the classes.

Materials are purchased with grant funds from the Prince Charitable Trusts' hospital morale program. Prince Charitable Trusts serves organizations in Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Rhode Island. Although the deadline for morale grants was Sept. 1, you can visit the trust web site at [www.fdncenter.org/grantmaker/prince/](http://www.fdncenter.org/grantmaker/prince/) and start planning for next year.

The award given to Lombardi's Arts and Humanities Program runs for three years. In addition to covering materials, the award pays the salary of the program director and provides stipends for artists who teach

classes. The arts program has been such a success that Lombardi wants to continue it indefinitely and is actively seeking additional sources of funding.

Staff members are encouraged to do craft projects individually or as a team. For example, the personnel on the oncology inpatient unit made a quilt in the "flying goose" pattern,

which now hangs proudly on their ward. Affirmations for patients are tucked into the wings. Kits with the craft project of the week are available for busy staff members who cannot attend classes, and Nancy Morgan, the program's director, says they "go like hotcakes."

Lombardi has not forgotten its researchers. The D.C. Commission on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts have sponsored a tour of a local artist's huge, brilliantly colored canvases of D.C. dancers. Morgan placed them in the halls of the underground research labs, and they have been a great success, transforming a drab space with no exterior access into a place where staff members like to mingle. The exhibit remained in place for the summer of 2002.



**A physician meets clay in Lombardi's program.**



**In Lombardi's atrium, performers raise spirits.**

month for both staff and patients. A particular article of clothing is chosen and participants wear the wildest variations of it they can find. Marna Daws, an administrative assistant for the cancer center, said she remembers Crazy Hat Day and Crazy Tie Day with particular fondness. She saw a "Cat in the Hat" hat, a man in a woman's sun hat, reindeer antlers, a leprechaun hat, a headband made of construction paper feathers designed by a co-worker's nine-year-old daughter, and a tie made out of duct tape. Her own tie was made from an old plant ribbon adorned with a plastic gecko and Christmas balls. "Staff members who normally don't have an opportunity to interact comment on each other's ingenuity and style," said Daws. "It makes us all a much tighter team."

## Writing the Blues Away

The Lombardi Cancer Center also offers creative writing workshops run by Morgan, who has special training in using writing as a healing tool. Classes meet once a week for an hour and are ongoing, so patients and staff members may plug into them at any time. After a topic is chosen, Morgan reads a related poem or essay, and the class writes about the topic in any form they choose—poem, short story, memoir, essay, or journal entry. Class members share their work at the end of the session.

Special classes have been run for the development office, administrative assistants, and nurses, and Morgan will conduct a class for the chaplains as soon as time permits. She also does one-on-one sessions for bed-bound or room-bound patients.

The classes are so popular that Morgan makes staff kits with the week's topic and essay/poem for people to take home. Staff members have told her how much the kits and the class mean to them, and often bounce into her office to show her what they wrote. ☐

## 14 Valentine Fun

Last Valentine's Day, Lombardi's arts program set up several tables filled with lace, colored paper, velvet, sequins, feathers, and glue and let everyone—staff and patients—create their own valentines. The tables were completely empty by 5 p.m. The arts director visited the offices of doctors who were too busy to participate and offered them candy hearts with sayings, which were joyfully received and eaten on the spot.

What does your hospital do to support its staff? *Oncology Issues* would like to know and plans to publish an update to this article in an upcoming issue. E-mail your comments to [writer@acc-cancer.org](mailto:writer@acc-cancer.org). ☐

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