

In-Reach

Huntington Hospital's groundbreaking support group—for employees

BY GAIL PROBST, RN, AOCN® AND SUSAN DEGNAN, LMSW

The importance of support groups is well-documented. Most—if not all—community cancer centers offer their patients access to a variety of support groups. But how many have developed support groups for their staff? The Don Monti Cancer Center at Huntington Hospital, Huntington, N.Y., did just that. Here's their story.

One of the most frequently asked questions to our Oncology Unit concerns the “support” groups we offer. On a regular basis, we have from 10 to 12 ongoing groups, including breast cancer, prostate cancer, a general oncology patient support group, a bereavement group, an ostomy group, and the American Cancer Society's *Look Good...Feel Better* program. Staff registered nurses and social workers facilitate these groups, which are offered free of charge to the community.

Our hospital recently agreed to add a new offering—an Employee Cancer Support Group. Our oncology social worker recognized the potential to offer support to our staff members who either had cancer themselves or were caring for a family member with cancer.

In today's healthcare environment, reaching “in” to support employees makes sense. Statistics have shown that the average age of today's healthcare worker is increasing. For example, according to the American Nurses Association the average age of a registered nurse is 45.2 years. The incidence of cancer increases with age, making it largely a disease that strikes

those over the age of 50. Given the “graying” of America's healthcare workforce, many may be living and working having been diagnosed with cancer or are caring for a loved one with cancer.

“In” reach is important because despite the advances that have been made in treating the disease and the increased survivorship, cancer remains a frightening diagnosis. Cancer patients often report feeling isolated and can benefit from the support of others who are going through similar experiences.

Although we had long been focused on providing support to the cancer patients we care for, we had more difficulty being supportive of our co-workers who had cancer, had a loved one with cancer, or were involved as a direct caregiver to patients with cancer. Nonetheless, our staff understood the needs of this population. They need a safe environment to discuss their concerns and feelings as well as to learn strategies for coping with cancer.

Oncology Social Worker Susan Degnan, LMSW, proposed the idea of an Employee Cancer Support Group to our Cancer Committee and was met with tremendous enthusiasm and support. The hospital administration allowed a flyer describing the group to be distributed in each of our hospital's 1,700 employees' pay envelopes.

The project was launched in November of 2004 and is still a work in progress. Currently, the group meets twice a month, in one of the hospital's conference rooms, and lunch is provided. Meeting



Gail Probst



Susan Degnan

days alternate so that staff's work schedules don't preclude participation.

Confidentiality is handled in the group as in all support groups. It is reviewed with all members at the beginning of each group ses-

sion, and it is stressed that what is discussed in the group should not be discussed outside the group.

We are seeking creative ideas to help increase attendance. Those who have attended the group have felt that it is very beneficial.

As our country's healthcare workforce ages, we are becoming susceptible to the same illnesses that we see in the patients we care for daily. An Employee Cancer Support Group is one way to support our co-workers so that they are able to continue to work and cope with the stress of illness along with the everyday stresses of today's healthcare environment. ☐

Gail Probst, RN, AOCN, is the Director of Cancer Services at the Don Monti Cancer Center at Huntington Hospital in Huntington, N.Y., and Susan Degnan, LMSW, is Huntington Hospital's Oncology Social Worker.