

Cancer treatment gets some complements



PAUL MURRAY

Two mornings a week, an ordinary bunch of souls shuffles into Steve Smith's gym at Claremont Oval for the regulation hour of huffing and puffing.

I say this bunch is ordinary only because there's not much about them that tells you they are extraordinary. And maybe they're not, apart from a few shorter-than-usual circuits and the odd headscarf you don't see on your average gym junkie.

This is the Chemo Club. These are ordinary people because cancer strikes everywhere. And we're all potential members of the club.

How it came to be formed tells an interesting story about a different approach to health care which is community-based and questions the ideological split in Western medicine between mind and body. The Chemo Club is a spinoff from Dr David Joske's SolarisCare Foundation. Dr Joske is the head of haematology at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital and for the past eight years he's been pursuing the use of complementary therapies in treating his cancer patients.

The foundation began a cancer support centre at Charlies in 2001, funded through the generosity of the Browne's company. Within a year, Dr Joske had advertised for people who thought they could contribute alternative therapies which would be useful to cancer patients.

"We got some whacky people who wanted to hang crystals over the chemotherapy bags," Dr Joske said as he showed me through the centre this week.

"But I selected therapies initially where I thought I could share some kind of dialogue. Most of these were massage based or psychological. So we put them in the centre and told patients 'try these if you want'."

News got around that the centre was into things like aromatherapy, acupuncture, reiki, yoga, reiki and music therapy — even energy healing.

"There was a fair bit of flak initially," Dr Joske said. "Nothing vindictive, but genuine concern from colleagues. I got a letter from a surgeon who said he was worried his patients were being exposed to quackery and said this was a repudiation of everything the medical school stood for. That strikes a nerve with me because my father was dean of the medical school for nine years.

"So we started collecting the quality-of-life data. Firstly, like Hippocrates says, we needed evidence that we were doing no harm and then the only way to ensure the long-term future of the centre was to get evidence that it was doing good.

"We have now got data for 1000 patients and 200 carers and there are consistent improvements for people using the centre. Critics will say it's not a randomised controlled trial, and it's not, but over five years the improvements are pretty hard to explain in any other way."

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DR DAVID JOSKE

A recent review published in the journal of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians is the first of a series of studies trying to establish the effect of these therapies on immune function.

"Anything that positively influences the immune system will be helpful in treatment," Dr Joske said. "And I strongly suspect that complementary therapies do."

"It is very hard to prove and I am not at the moment suggesting that we can improve survival and reduce relapse. We are treating symptoms.

"We have realistic goals for complementary therapy. We never dissuade people from mainstream treatment. We never claim a cure."

The most recent push is into exercise through the Chemo Club, which like all SolarisCare services is open to all cancer patients, not just those being treated at Charlies.

"Last October I was working out with Smithy in the gym and said I really need to get a gym in the cancer centre so people could get some exercise," Dr Joske said.

"And Smithy quite literally said: 'Hah, on, I've got one of them.'

"So within four weeks he'd organised Chemo Club with two nurses who've been through chemotherapy themselves so everyone is carefully supervised. And it's just taken off.

"Chemo makes you lose muscle mass. Even though many patients try to exercise they just can't put the muscle mass back on. And so it always feels harder to do the ordinary things.

"We seem to be able to break the cycle with a little bit of resistance training so they don't lose the muscle mass and they don't get this awful fatigue.

"In reality, a gym here wouldn't have worked as well. Patients like it offsite because they feel they are doing something normal. Importantly, it restores a sense of community to people's lives.

"The SolarisCare centre makes use of a wellspring of people in the community who want to help and don't know how to and the centre focuses it and turns it to positive outcomes."

The Chemo Club is free and operates totally on donated services. A physiotherapist and an exercise physiologist have now joined the nurses. Nearly every week, sportsmen such as Justin Langer and Andrew Embley drop by to help with the exercise sessions.

"This volunteering thing will get more and more important in health and the trouble is how to fund it," Dr Joske said.

"I'm not sure in a business sense I've created a sustainable model for SolarisCare yet.

"It lives on the smell of an oily rag and we don't pay the therapists, some of whom I've been with us for the whole five years."

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