

Pari Forood, Executive Director, Miles of Hope Breast Cancer Foundation, speaking at an American Cancer Society program in Poughkeepsie, NY, October, 2010.

At Miles of Hope, when October rolls around, we say "Happy Breast Cancer Awareness Month!" It has become a celebration in this country of all survivors and their successful treatment and all of the research and funding that has made new technology part of the cure. We salute nurses, doctors, technicians, scientists and biomedical engineers for their diligence and nurturing. And we remember with fondness and regret those who died of this terrible disease.

When we started the Foundation in 2004, our mission was clear-to fund support services for people affected by breast cancer in the eight counties of the Hudson Valley. In order to achieve this goal, we decided to focus on four major areas of funding: scholarships to high school seniors whose lives have been affected by breast cancer; peer to peer counseling connecting a newly diagnosed patient with a trained survivor; a medical gap care program to provide compensation for anyone in treatment with a financial emergency (i.e. rent, gas, food, heat, electricity, insurance co-pay); and a complementary medicine program offering alternative therapies to enhance recovery.

Complementary medicine is a relatively new term. It refers to types of therapy which are complementary or ancillary to a patient's doctor-prescribed treatment. The 2007 National Health Interview Survey by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine and the National Center for Health Statistics reported that 38% of adults in the US are using some form of complementary and alternative medicine. And now to an eye-opening fact: the rate of CAM use in women with breast cancer has been stated to be as high as 75%. Women with breast cancer seek complementary medicine more than other patient populations with cancer.

Complementary medicine can be anything from herbal tea to acupuncture to art therapy. The most common reason to use it is to lessen the uncomfortable or even sickening impact of the side effects of conventional treatment. These types of after effects as well as the stress of surgery may inhibit a patient's ability to recover quickly. In many cases, complementary medicine can help.

Recently diagnosed patients experience high levels of anxiety and stress – understandably. Studies from the Mao Clinic in Minnesota and Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City show that these high levels of nervous tension can be soothed with non-traditional forms of physical therapy like massage therapy, reflexology, reiki, and relaxation technique.

At Miles of Hope we have funded many forms of complementary medicine: music therapy, art therapy, massage therapy, reiki, exercise/dance, and acupuncture. We like to think that just coming to one of our events is therapy in itself but helping hospitals with complementary medicine programs fulfills one of our four primary goals and we dedicate a quarter of our funding dollars to it.

According to the Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing, the reason for complementary medicine use for women with breast cancer is to promote healing and emotional health. It must be stressed however, that these programs while helpful in terms of relief of cancer-related symptoms, have not been shown to be effective at slowing disease progression or curing cancer.

Currently, Vassar Brothers Medical Center and St. Francis Hospital are two recipients of complementary medicine programs funded by Miles of Hope. The massage therapy program at the Dyson Center for Cancer Care at VBMC has received excellent feedback and results. Dr.

Angela Keleher, Director of Breast Services here and a Miles of Hope Board member, has told us that patients who receive a massage prior to surgery are more calm and relaxed. Their blood pressure is lowered and therefore they are able to tolerate the stress of surgery and post surgical trauma better than if they had not had massage therapy. She has also told us that continued massage treatments aid in the recovery of patients as it reduces their stress levels and allows them to heal in a timely fashion.

We have had similar feedback from the reflexology, reiki and relaxation program at St. Francis Hospital. Trained professionals treat breast cancer patients and assist in reducing blood pressure and stress. They also help patients to be proactive in their recuperation programs by choosing and initiating recovery vehicles thus improving emotional health as well as a sense of physical well being. These programs will probably never be in a hospital's budget, but by offering them, Miles of Hope can add to the total picture of a breast cancer patient's health, and enhance their recovery.

At Benedictine Hospital in Kingston, Miles of Hope funded an art in wellness program to help breast cancer patients explore, express themselves and heal through the creative process. Everything from working with clay or words to creating personal collages or mask making has been taught to recovering breast cancer patients to encourage healing. Barrett Art Center in Poughkeepsie had a similar Miles of Hope funded program entitled Barrett Clay Works Survivor Therapy Classes offering art/clay therapy for breast cancer survivors specifically to promote a return to pre-surgery coordination.

Bottom line, it is all about the enhancement of recovery -- how we at Miles of Hope can help the medical community make a patient's perilous journey from diagnosis through treatment and into recovery slightly less horrible. By funding complementary medicine programs we

want to help a patient relax, take control, create or dance. We want people to know that no one diagnosed with breast cancer in the Hudson Valley is alone, they have us.