Twice a week, artist Holly Nelson visits Hennepin County Medical Center’s (HCMC) Comprehensive Cancer Center equipped with a colorful collection of art materials. As adult patients settle into chairs to receive outpatient chemotherapy, Nelson thoughtfully approaches them and asks, “Would you like to make something today?”

For Nelson, it’s a delicate yet intense moment. Many of HCMC’s patients do not speak English as their first language. Most do not participate in arts activities because of the expense. And many are exhausted from treatment, anxious about their outcome and sometimes less than hopeful.

“The ask is huge,” she says. “I try to be calm, deferential and gauge their reaction. Simply saying ‘no’ can be empowering for them.” More often than not, patients welcome the opportunity for a creative distraction. And when they do, Nelson pulls up a rolling cart that serves as an art table, and they get to work.

In October 2012, Nelson joined HCMC as an artist in residence assigned to work with cancer patients. Hennepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis and Sanford Medical Center in Fargo were among 90 organizations nationwide to win a $15,000 award from the Livestrong Foundation in the spring of 2012 to establish artist-in-residence programs for cancer patients.
Typically, artists in residence are professional artists brought into organizations to work with staff, clients or students who lack experience with a particular art form. In health care settings, artists in residence work with patients. (Note: They are not art therapists, who are specially trained to respond to patients’ psychosocial needs and more closely integrate their work with that of other members of a health care team.)

The Livestrong grant recipients were required to create a program modeled after the Creative Center at University Settlement’s artists-in-residence program in New York, which was designated a best practice model by the National Endowment for the Arts. Recipients were to hire artists to work at the bedside or in small-group settings to help patients learn about art and become absorbed in their own creativity as they deal with their diagnosis, treatment and survivorship. The grant also provided training for the artists.

HCMC used the funds to bring in an artist to work with patients in its Comprehensive Cancer Center eight hours a week for 11 months, plus purchase supplies. Sanford Health’s Roger Maris Cancer Center used the money, and supplemented it with matching funds from the Sanford Health Foundation, to provide 16 contact hours a week for a year.

**A creative distraction**

Like many artists in residence, Nelson is a teaching artist. She is the adult program director at the Minnetonka Center for the Arts, and she owns Holly Nelson Studio, which sells drawings and paintings. This isn’t her first stint as an artist in residence at a hospital; she has worked in the hematology/oncology unit at Methodist Hospital in Rochester.

Drawing from her extensive background, Nelson helps patients at HCMC paint with watercolors, draw or do crafts. For example, they might make a portrait or create a gift or card for a family member. A favorite project is making colorful clay flower blossoms using a pill cup as a vase.

Sometimes if patients are too exhausted to participate or unable to use their hands, Nelson will take the lead. Listening intently to the patient, she’ll paint a landscape or a childhood home or illustrate an important memory so patients can later admire the painting and meditate. She’s also made farewell cards for terminal patients to give to loved ones. Nelson calls all of these projects “art collaborations” because, she says, she is merely “bringing out the art that is already within them.”

Nelson notices her patients change when they get involved in a project: Jittery knees stop bouncing and anxious eyes soften. They often tell her time passes quickly while they are doing an art activity. And while working together, her patients frequently share stories about their lives, their families and their achievements. “We can enjoy a very important conversation on a different level than their conversations with physicians or nurses,” she says. “I think patients feel better physically and emotionally after spending time with me. It makes their whole experience more positive.”

HCMC has been integrating the arts into hospital care for more than a decade through its Inspire Arts program—a part of its Patient Experience Services Department. Funded by charitable donations, Inspire Arts offers patients and their families opportunities to make art at the bedside or in waiting rooms, an art cart stocked with art supplies, community and employee art exhibits, artist receptions and talks,
Nelson is grateful to know her work is appreciated. “The staff have been incredibly supportive and encouraging from the beginning of my residency, and we have a shared enthusiasm for the work created by patients,” she says. And she knows she’s lucky to have landed her two artist-in-residency positions. “I know there are many teaching artists and professional artists who would love to do this work, but there simply are no positions available,” she says.

Conversations and collaborations
At Sanford Health’s Roger Maris Cancer Center in Fargo, artist in residence Heather Zinger is using art to connect with cancer patients and others in the community. Like Nelson, she gets patients involved in projects such as making domino magnets or transforming a photo of themselves into a humorous image of a leprechaun, the Easter bunny or Uncle Sam.

“It’s a great way to pass the time,” Zinger says, explaining that her patients are often receiving chemotherapy while working on art. “I want to bring humor to them.” She also involves others in projects. For example, she recruited elementary school students from Fargo Public Schools to make cards for patients depicting the children’s favorite animals or something else that makes them happy. The idea was to get patients to visualize playful, cheerful images through the eyes of a child. Zinger also enlisted art students from North Dakota State University to create personalized lanyards to hold the I.D. badges for 16 medical oncology nurses.

“The lanyard project showed how nurses can be touched by the creative process,” she says. “These customized, artful lanyards became a symbol of appreciation for their work and a testament to creativity put into a hospital setting.”

The creative projects also get people talking. “Art is all about conversation, and these projects really gave our patients and staff something to talk about other than illness,” Zinger says. She adds that the projects are appreciated by more than just patients. “The students felt like they mattered. With art, the focus isn’t just on the patient. Everyone around it benefits as well.”

Zinger firmly believes the arts can provide psychosocial benefits to people suffering from anxiety, loneliness or boredom. And she believes she’s witnessing the healing power of the arts when her patients wear silly disguises they’ve created or when staff members join in the laughter. She believes providing an enriched environment and social interaction can have a measurable impact on how patients heal.

Research supports Zinger’s belief. According to the 2009 State of the Field Report: Arts in Healthcare, some of the benefits of participating in visual arts activities include:

- Decreased symptoms of distress and improved quality of life for women with cancer
- Lessened depression symptoms and reduced fatigue in cancer patients receiving chemotherapy
- Fewer symptoms of acute stress in pediatric trauma patients
- Greater psychological strength in cancer patients
- More positive feelings and less distress in adult bone marrow transplant patients in isolation.

Shelby Terstriep, M.D., medical director of Sanford Health’s Embrace Cancer Survivorship Program, has seen firsthand how the artist-in-residence program is helping patients. For example, her staff were able to cut the dose of a patient’s pain medication in half because the woman was doing art while her wound dressing was changed. When the procedure was finished, the patient thanked the staff, telling them the art project was instrumental in reducing her pain.

“Healing comes in multiple ways,” Terstriep says. “Patients have a lot of down time, and if we can engage and distract them with art, that helps. We need to treat their emotional side as well as their physical well-being.”

Uncertain futures
Funding for these artist-in-residence programs will run out this fall. Both HCMC and Sanford Medical Center are looking for ways to continue and expand them to patients in other departments because of the benefits they’ve seen.

“Our whole industry should recognize the importance of art,” Terstriep says. “In a perfect world, artist-in-residence programs would have as much consideration as any other medical center initiative. Showing that we care about the whole person matters.” MM

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