

Area Hospitals Increase Cancer Support Groups

by Joel Moreno

In an effort to help end the isolation, and to encourage cancer patients to share their experiences and anxieties with others diagnosed with cancer, Dominican Santa Cruz and Watsonville Community hospital officials have expanded their cancer support group programs.

Dominican now offers three weekly cancer support groups free to cancer patients and their support-givers. Groups meet every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday at the hospital.

"Ours are drop-in groups," said Kathleen Johnson, a trained oncology chaplain and one of three support group facilitators at Dominican. "We refer to ourselves as interim emotional support and education for people coping with cancer."

Watsonville hospital launches an eight week cancer support program on October 19. The series meets every Wednesday evening and continues through December at the hospital's oncology outpatient unit. The program will actually be ongoing, according to hospital spokeswoman Diana Wahnoutka, but is being set up as an eight week series to encourage people to attend the sessions.



have included recovering cancer patients relating their personal struggles, massage therapists talking about the role of touch, and pharmacists familiar with pain management strategies.

"What people in the group tell us is that they wish they had come to a group earlier," Johnson said.

Dominican receives on average 500 cancer outpatient visits per month, which does not include the 350 to 450 patient treatment days tallied for inpatients in a month.

Dominican has administered can-

moting the availability of classes.

"One of our difficulties is that there are people who feel you have to be going off the deep end to need a support group," Johnson said. "They need to realize that even very healthy people coping with a life-altering disease, that a support group is a wonderful part of their overall treatment program."

Aside from Johnson, the other group facilitators at Dominican are Larry Morkert and Julie Martin-Pitts. The three have years of training and experience in cancer treatments and the development of support systems for people. Martin-Pitts co-authored a book titled "Cancer Diagnosis: What Can I Do Now?" They conduct the weekly sessions with two facilitators present at a time.

Watsonville's group facilitator, Dhira Wallsten, is a hospital social worker with home care experience. She has led well-attended therapy groups at Stanford University for the last four years. Wallsten also worked with Hospice Care Project of Santa Cruz County and received a fellowship from the American Cancer Society for specialized oncology training.

The Dominican Hospital Foundation provides the program's funding, so there is no additional cost to the patient. The Watsonville program is also free, and Wallsten will be volunteering her time to the support group.

For more information or to register, at Dominican call 462- 7567. Persons interested in the Watsonville group should call 761- 5665. □

... cancer patients who belong to a support group enjoy a quality of life up to two years longer than patients who don't attend such sessions.

—Stanford University Study

"We want to eliminate that drop-in situation that usually occurs with support groups," Wahnoutka said. "We're trying to develop continuity by making it an eight week situation."

Dominican Hospital is also trying something new with their support sessions. Twice a week they plan to break into separate care-giver groups and patient groups, when normally they meet together. Johnson said some patients feel more comfortable and talk more freely without their care-givers present.

Dominican also tries to bring in educational and motivational speakers at least once a month. Past speakers

have included recovering cancer patients relating their personal struggles, massage therapists talking about the role of touch, and pharmacists familiar with pain management strategies.

Hospital workers base this recommendation on a study released this year from Stanford University, which found that cancer patients who belong to a support group enjoy a quality of life up to two years longer than patients who don't attend such sessions. With this new understanding, hospital staffers are vigorously pro-