

ICAN EXPANDS ITS REACH

Web Course and Workshops Prepare Social Workers to Counsel Cancer Patients and Their Families

For the past five years, the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, working with its partners Cancer Care, the Alliance for Children and Families, the American Psychosocial Oncology Society and experts based at the H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center, has been extending awareness of cancer to social workers in Florida — a pilot program that each year has grown in size and scope in order to provide more community-based support for cancer patients and their caregivers. In 2004, ICAN (Individual Cancer Assistance Network) crossed state lines and jumped onto the web to try to reach many thousands of social workers to help them understand the special nature and psychological needs of cancer patients and their families.

Says Diane Blum, executive director of Cancer Care, “We took the program that we developed to train mental health professionals in Florida and in April 2004 launched an online training curriculum made available to many thousands of social workers, to develop a basic level of expertise in oncology, to raise awareness and to increase skill levels. We had 5,000 people use the course within the first six weeks. The feedback is that it clarified misconceptions people have had and we hope it has stimulated interest to go on and learn more.” Cancer Care provided the technical expertise for developing the curriculum.

So far, adds Betsy Clark, executive director of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), under whose aegis the training is being developed and distributed, “About 12,000 social workers representing some 81 countries have already participated and taken the two-hour, web-based course. The goal has been not to turn out professionally trained oncology social workers. Instead, we know there are at least 600,000 social workers out there, and we asked ourselves: ‘Since cancer will be a factor in all our lives over the next decade as baby boomers age, how will a social worker be able to practice without some understanding of cancer?’ We wanted to make people cancer aware. What are the myths about cancer? What are the myths about clinical trials? Many of our social workers work for employee assistance programs. What do they know about cancer? How can they advise employees about what to do about work while undergoing treatment unless they know more?”

In addition to the web-based training, a second level of in-depth training is being made available. Six state chapters of the NASW will be holding workshops for social workers led by experts from Moffitt and Cancer Care.

“I am a trained oncology social worker myself,” Clark says, “but there are only 1,200 of us out there — not many when you consider the explosion of cancer cases that will come with our aging population. Our hope is that as people learn something about cancer they will want to stay in oncology social work. Until I started my training, I didn’t understand there is a more hopeful side of cancer. Now we want to explain that to others.”

In March 2005, the NASW also launched a consumer website, based on the content provided to social workers, to heighten cancer awareness among the general population. “We couldn’t have done it without the Bristol-Myers Squibb funding for social worker awareness,” Clark adds. The Bristol funding also allowed the social worker course to be offered without charge for continuing education unit credits.

She continues, “Almost everyone is touched by cancer, but as a society we are so unprepared to deal with the impact. We have to stop stigmatizing this disease. The population doesn’t understand cancer. They have a memory of it from a long time ago. It’s important to demystify it. It’s so awful to have a disease that people are afraid to even name. Today, many cancers can be cured, treated and controlled, like other diseases. We have to get the word out and get social workers to help spread that word and to help those in need.”

