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Studying the Benefits of Massage for Advanced Cancer Patients

By Julie Engebretson

Even in a professional hospice environment, those suffering from advanced cancer are consistently, if not constantly, plagued by fatigue, pain, and loss of appetite. Cancer patients and health professionals at hospice programs are anxiously awaiting the results of a study to be conducted by the Health Sciences Center at the University of Colorado at Denver.

Researchers hope to show that regular massage therapy decreases pain, improves quality of life, and reduces physical and emotional distress among patients suffering from advanced stages of cancer.

Jean Kutner, MD, MSPH, associate professor of internal medicine at the CU School of Medicine and principal investigator in the study, is optimistic. "Hospice programs are very interested in the study because they believe massage works, and we anticipate that the study will show that patients who receive the massage therapy will experience a better quality of life during end-of-life care." Dr. Kutner also feels that patients suffering from advanced cancer are made to rely too heavily on drugs to treat symptoms that massage can treat more thoroughly, and without all the side effects and interactions. Now, researchers have to provide hard evidence as proof. "Most complementary therapies have not undergone rigorous scientific review," she said. "People believe it works, but data are needed to prove if patients are truly benefiting, and a study of this magnitude will help us gather that data."

In 2003, the National Institutes of Health awarded a \$1.2 million grant to conduct the study. As of April 2006, a total of 311 patients with advanced cancer have been enrolled. Registered participants have been enrolled from several sites around the country as part of a national hospice research network. Dr. Kutner and the team hope to have 440 patients enrolled in the study by August.

If you, a friend or loved one, or a client suffers from advanced-stage cancer and is interested in participating in this important study, contact Karen Mellis, study coordinator, at (303) 372-9088 or via e-mail at

karen.mellis@uchsc.edu. Applicants must speak English, be at least 18 years of age, and be diagnosed with stage three or stage four cancer of any type.



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