

## Providing the Little Things That Mean the Most



Photographs by Susan Spann for The New York Times

**THE HUMAN TOUCH:** At the Charlotte Maxwell Clinic in Oakland, Calif., Edith Heine is massaged by Betty Segal. At the clinic, hand and foot massages are part of the package, too.

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

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**T**O talk. To be listened to. To unwind. To be touched.

When you are a low-income woman with cancer, and you live in the margins, it is often the little things — a caring touch, a steaming cup of herbal tea — that can make a difference.

"Sometimes I just want to talk," Carol Neal, a 59-year-old waitress who has malignant melanoma, said about her visits twice a month to the Charlotte Maxwell Clinic here. "Sometimes I just want to be touched. That's human."

Decorated with patchwork quilts and Tibetan Buddhist prayer flags, the clinic addresses what a social worker at the clinic, Beverly Lowe, calls an invisible problem — the economic and emotional

fallout that cancer can have on low-income women already underserved by the health care system.

The clinic — a volunteer network of some 120 massage therapists, acupuncturists, social workers and homeopathy specialists in the Bay Area — provides free alternative medicine treatments and other services to women for whom even a massage is an unthinkable, unaffordable luxury.

"It keeps the pain away," said Michelle Smots, 39, who comes in every weekend for acupuncture to relieve the side effects of chemotherapy. "This place keeps me going from head to toe."

Founded in 1989 with \$4,000, the clinic, considered a model for other organizations, is named after Charlotte Maxwell, a social worker who died

of ovarian cancer and who thought that alternative therapies enhanced her life in her final months.

In the last decade, the clinic has grown from a tiny office serving a small number of women one afternoon a week to the first floor of a clapboard house visited by more than 250 clients, including more and more homeless women. It is dedicated to countering some bleak statistics: according to the American Cancer Society, low-income patients with breast cancer have lower five-year survival rates than higher-income patients.

In California, the mortality rate for African-American women is 23.4 percent higher than for white women, even though the incidence rate is 18.8 percent lower, according to the state cancer registry. Low-income black women are also three

times more likely than higher-income black women to receive a diagnosis in the advanced stages of disease. While a cancer diagnosis can be devastating, to a woman who may be a single mother, or working in a low-paying job with no benefits, it can tip the balance into poverty.

"Many clients come in in acute stages of crisis," said Beverly Burns, an acupuncturist who specializes in women with cancer and is a co-founder of the clinic. "If you clean houses for a living and you can't work that week because of chemotherapy, it can take a huge financial and emotional toll."

The clinic, which receives financing from the California Endowment, the local Susan G. Komen Foundation, the East Bay Community Foundation and other nonprofit groups, has an

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annual budget of about \$250,000 and provides support in many ways. Acupuncture has been used to treat post-surgical pain, and chemotherapy-related nausea, vomiting and fatigue. Chinese herbs have been used to help ease symptoms of premature menopause and the side effects of tamoxifen, a breast cancer medicine. The clinic handles large issues, like an emergency fund to help pay a rent, and small ones, like providing pillows to ease the pain of bone metastasis, or creams to soothe parched, burning skin after radiation therapy. If a woman has no transportation, a network of volunteers serves as drivers; if she is too sick to travel, therapists make house calls.

From grocery bags of organic produce to the mailbox on the front porch for herb pickups, the idea is to rebalance the body both physically and psychically. "Coming here gives me energy and helps my body deal with all the stress," said Patricia Ramirez, a 30-year-old waitress who started radiation treatments for breast cancer a year ago. "It's having my own time for relaxing."

The clinic is a supplement to, not a replacement for, conventional cancer therapy. All clients are required to see oncologists. They typically find out about the Charlotte Maxwell Clinic from oncologists, hospital social workers and cancer support groups. Although some clients receive disability payments, many do not because of requirements that the patient be disabled for at least a year. "Frequently, treatment doesn't last that long, at least initially," said Ms. Lowe, the social worker. Medicare payments do not cover loss of income.

For a woman without insurance in a marginal job, anxiety about the disease is often compounded by harsh reality. "When women without financial



**ALL-EMBRACING:** Beverly Burns, an acupuncturist, hugs a patient, Karen Holly.

resources get cancer, the level of fear about potentially becoming homeless or being unable to care for one's children is hard to articulate," Ms. Lowe said. "There's also often a loss of self-esteem. They somehow feel they've done something wrong because they got sick and don't have health insurance."

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Massage and other alternative therapies, services not covered by insurance and typically available only to people with financial resources, are an attempt to redress an imbalance in the health care system.

"Ethnic minority women have a great disparity in terms of cancer survival rates," said Tari Hanneman, senior program associate with the California Endowment, a nonprofit group focusing on health care. "The services that the clinic provides help this population get through and adhere to their cancer treatments so it can improve their outcomes." The endowment recently gave the clinic a \$25,000 grant through its Local Opportunities Fund, which is intended to support grass-roots and nontraditional organizations.

In addition to acupuncture and mas-

sage, the clinic provides a dose of optimism. "In this society illness is so isolating," said Laura V. Moreno, 43, a cancer survivor who grew up in Mexico and is a translator and activities director for the clinic, leading kayaking trips. "People come in here and for a few hours they have full attention."

Linda Burdusis, 54, who has breast cancer, often has difficulty sleeping because of the pain that has metastasized into her bones. Her visits and the acupuncture treatments help her sleep through the night for a day or two. "It helps with my overall mood," she said. "You're feeling loved throughout the whole procedure. These volunteers could be in their clinics earning money, but instead they're here."

The clinic is open two and a half days a week. A satellite clinic has just started at the American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine in San Francisco, offering the same services one weekend a month. At the Oakland clinic, the demand is such that it can take two weeks to a month for a slot to become available, and the frequency of visits is based on need. The long-range goal, Ms. Burns said, is to expand and serve more women by keeping the clinic open five days a week. She said the clinic would need \$700,000 a year to stay open that much, and would include hiring additional support staff.

The atmosphere, which always includes coffee, doughnuts and lively conversation, contrasts not only with her hospital, Ms. Burdusis said, but also with her support group. "In the support group, everyone's complaining," she said. "You can get very depressed. I'm a hugger, and the human touch feels so good. You walk out of here with a calmed spirit."

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