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“ And I walk away with so much emotional support every time. I’m doing OK. ”

Maria Oghorie, cancer patient

Clinic gives free therapy for cancer’s side effects



Through an acupuncture session at the Charlotte Maxwell Complementary Clinic, Cleo Smith of Oakland finds some relief from the nausea and fatigue caused by chemotherapy treatments.

Women reassured by friendly atmosphere

By Angela Hill
STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND
THE CHARLOTTE Maxwell Complementary Clinic is housed in the large lower flat of a modest converted apartment building on Telegraph Avenue.

The front rooms have been transformed into offices, and the bedrooms into treatment rooms for acupuncture and massage therapy, counseling services and visualization sessions. Someone has hung a pretty dried-flower wreath on the client-lounge door, a small room in the back of the flat where women with cancer gather and talk and have a snack before and after their appointments.

In the hallway, there are some drawings and a quilt, made over the years by dozens of women — some who survived ovarian or breast cancer and some who did not, but all who found a level of comfort here they could find nowhere else during the most difficult time in their lives.

Their traditional medical treatments, such as surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation, caused numerous side effects including nausea, pain and fatigue, which were eased by the free alternative therapies offered at this clinic — services not covered by insurance and therefore usually only accessible to women with healthier resources.



CONNIE MURRAY — Staff photo

Acupuncturist Bev Burns begins a treatment for Susie Turnipseed of Fremont at the Charlotte Maxwell Complementary Clinic in Oakland, which offers alternative therapies to lower-income women with cancer.

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The lower-income women who come here say the services are a godsend. Maria Oghorie, 34, of Oakland has had four surgeries, including a mastectomy just a month ago. She had had chemo and radiation, tenderness and pain from the surgeries. She has been coming to Charlotte Maxwell since October.

"This has been such a blessing," she said. "My medical treatments have been very difficult. So I take advantage of all the services here. There would be no way I could afford these on my own."

"And I walk away with so much emotional support every time," she said. "I'm doing OK. I thank God I'm alive."

The clinic is named after Charlotte Maxwell, who died of ovarian cancer in 1988. She was a strong believer in the therapies that improved the quality of her own life in her last few months, and was determined such treatments should be available free to women who could not otherwise afford them.

After Maxwell's death, a group of health care providers and women with cancer followed her philosophy and founded the clinic. It opened in 1995 as a state-licensed holistic health clinic in a small office on College Avenue in Oakland, then moved to the larger accommodations at 5691 Telegraph Ave. about three years ago.

More than 100 practitioners and support staff — all volunteers — assist the women with acupuncture, Chinese and Western herb treatments, homeopathy, massage therapy and visualization techniques. They also offer social work assistance, educational workshops and transportation to and from clinic appointments.

There's even the occasional excursion to hot springs in Sonoma. A post-treatment program was created just this year, and the clinic's Web site just went online last week at www.charlottemaxwell.org.

The clinic's only funding comes through various foundations and private donations. It receives no city, state or federal money, said the facility's executive director, Connie Herrick.

"A few of the treatment rooms are getting a facelift this month — new carpeting and paint, donated from a local construction company," she said. "All of the snacks — juices, breads and organic produce — are gifts from local stores and restaurants. We survive because of



CONNIE MURRAY — Staff

Clients at the Charlotte Maxwell Complementary Clinic in Oakland receive not only physical benefits through massage, acupuncture and herbal therapies, but also emotional support. Acupuncturist Bev Burns hugs client Cleo Smith goodbye after a session.

so many generous people."

Hundreds of women have come to the clinic over the years, and the client base is ever expanding. Right now there's a waiting list, but no one will be turned away, Herrick said.

Appointments are on weekends only, and that's when the place is simply buzzing, serving at least 36 to 40 women each day.

"It has become a real community of women here," Herrick said. "Clients get involved in our newsletter, in program development. They become deeply involved."

A handful of women were kidding around in the client lounge last week. Someone suggested they bring in wine instead of juice. Everyone laughed. It's far from a heavy hospital atmosphere, more like coming to a friend's house for a cup of tea and a strong shoulder.

You can cry here, and someone will hug you. You can make a joke and someone will smile.

"It's your whole well-being they treat here," said Susie Turnipseed, 50, of Fremont, her hair in a bandana, her eyes behind rose-colored glasses. "When you're able to restore peace of mind, you're able to get through all this. The people here have history with cancer and the treatments. They know what to expect before the symptoms happen, so they can help you with preventive care. And they talk with you about what to expect. That's been such a big help to me."

The emotional support has been extremely valuable to Vilma Del Castillo, 54, of Richmond, who says she has so much peripheral stress in her life in addition to cancer that it's often overwhelming.

"For me, this place is wonderful," she said.

"Not only the services, but they are friends for us. I have a lot of stress. They talk with you here. When you go home, you feel so much better."

Wearing a crocheted hat, sitting next to Del Castillo in the client lounge, Cleo Smith, 58, of Oakland began to weep as she talked about her recurring and spreading cancer. Del Castillo patted Smith on the shoulder. Both of have been coming to the clinic for a few years as they've gone through various treatments. Indeed, many of the women have become close friends.

"Some of my family members don't understand what this is I'm going through," Smith said. "The people here do. This is the only place I can find this comfort."

For more information on the Charlotte Maxwell Complementary Clinic, call (510) 601-7660, or visit www.charlottemaxwell.org.