

BREAST CANCER ACTION



I N S I D E

*The Charlotte Maxwell
Complementary Clinic:
A Community of Healing
and Support*

The Charlotte Maxwell Complementary Clinic *A Community of Healing and Support*

By Edare Carroll

Ten years ago low-income women diagnosed with breast cancer had relatively few treatment options and even less in the way of support systems or complementary therapies such as acupuncture and Chinese herbs. It was precisely this predicament that inspired a small group of Bay Area feminists and healers to establish the Charlotte Maxwell Complementary Clinic (CMCC) in Oakland.

Incorporated in 1989, the clinic is named in honor of a woman who benefited from complementary health care before her death in 1988 from ovarian cancer. Charlotte Maxwell believed strongly that Complementary Alternative Medicine (CAM) therapies should be made accessible to women who could not afford to pay for it. The clinic opened its doors to clients for the first time in 1992.

"The clinic is based on the premise that all women have the right to basic medical care and access to CAM therapies," explained Beverly Burns, Clinic Director.

To that end, CMCC provides free CAM treatments to low-income women with cancer while they are undergoing chemotherapy, radiation and surgery, as well as through the course of their disease. CAM treatments include acupuncture, Chinese and Western herbs, massage therapy, homeopathy and therapeutic imagery.

"The aim of these treatments is to offer relief from the terrible side effects of both cancer and its treatments—pain, nausea, fatigue, loss of appetite—and to enhance the immune systems as well as the quality of life for our clients," said Executive Director Connie Herrick.



CMCC executive director
Connie Herrick

Initially, the clinic provided only the core complementary therapies to ten to 15 women on a half day each Saturday. But due to community response, recognition and support, the clinic has quadrupled its clinic hours and maintains a pool of 115 volunteer practitioners and approximately 250 women clients, not to mention a long waiting list.

In addition to the aforementioned CAM therapies, CMCC offers social work assistance, transportation to and from appointments, fresh organic produce and bread (compliments of Full Belly Farms and SemiFreddi's Bakery), educational workshops, and access to a treatment fund that provides financial assistance for therapies not provided by the clinic. There's even a post-treatment program that extends CAM treatments and emotional support to women living with cancer who have finished their allopathic treatment and have no sign of recurrence.

"Our clinic is involved with every aspect of a woman's life. It became obvious pretty early on that a client's health was directly related to having a roof over her head and food in her

stomach, not just providing health care services. Sometimes our staff is on the phone with the local housing authority trying to secure housing for a homeless client, or talking with PG&E about a client's outstanding bill and agreeing to cover the expense so that her electricity is not turned off. Or we'll hold cooking classes so that clients learn new ways to prepare and eat the organic produce for themselves and their families.

"We try to offer a community of support to our clients so that they will be able to complete their cancer treatment," she says. "Clients need to know that there are people who care about them every step of the way. They need a place to come to that is safe to talk about what is happening to them."

All CMCC services are entirely free of charge and the client population crosses all borders of race and ethnicity. Currently 26 percent of clients are African American, 20 percent Latina, 6 percent Asian/South Pacific Islanders and 48 percent are Caucasian.

CMCC has established relationships with key social workers, nurses, and physicians at hospitals serving diverse populations around the Bay Area, allowing the clinic to maintain a high level of participation among minority groups. A woman receiving her cancer care at any of the county hospitals is automatically eligible for services at the clinic, as well as anyone with MediCal. Eligible income is 200% of the federal poverty guidelines or less. An initial financial assessment is completed with each prospective client. There are no residency or citizenship requirements.

"The sad truth is that poor women often have much later diagnoses because of lack of access to insurance and health care," says Herrick. "I'd say over half of the people we treat are in the late stages of cancer - stages three to four, or metastatic. We lose 10 percent of our clients every year."

In-Home Care

CMCC also recently began offering in-home comfort care to patients who are dying.

"This is not hospice," Burns explains. "But our volunteers will go to a client's home and help to ease the pain and anxiety associated with death by offering CAM treatments."

One client who benefited from such care was a woman named Carol Zambel, whose death had a tremendous impact on Burns. "I worked with her through her entire illness and became very close to her and her family. It was important to her that I be there when she was dying. She was so young when she was diagnosed and she fought so hard during her treatment. She fought equally hard to accept her death. I could not ask for a bigger blessing than to be with her Carol as she transitioned so gracefully to her death."

For Herrick, a memorable moment is the clinic's annual year-end party.

"At the end of the year we hold a party or gathering for all of clients and volunteers and staff," she says. "The first thing



Clinic director Beverly Burns (facing) with a client

we do is hold a ritual memorial for all the women who have passed away that year. Later, we'll do arts and crafts and other activities together. Last year we made a quilt and did Qigong together. That gathering sort of epitomizes to me what the whole cancer trip is about. It's full of grief and sadness, but there is so much intimacy, joy, and connection, too. I'm so grateful that we've been able to establish such a community of support for women."

Expanding Services

Looking to the future, Burns and Herrick have big dreams. Although it's still at the very early stages, CMCC recently received preliminary funding to expand its services to San Francisco.

"We need \$300,000 in sustainability funds to launch in San Francisco," Herrick says. "It's funny, when an article runs in a newspaper or magazine, we never receive donations. Always lots of new clients," she laughs, "but we welcome donations, too."

In five years, Herrick would like to see a San Francisco clinic up and running, to have secured a bigger building in Oakland for staff and clients, and expand clinic hours from Wednesday through Sunday. CMCC also hopes to have a van and driver to pick up clients.

"It's not our goal to have a clinic in every major urban center," she says. "Instead, we try to make an incredible impact on a few women's lives. It's about depth, not breadth. Sometimes people say to me, 'But you only service about 200 women? That doesn't seem like very many.' But we get involved in every aspect of their lives and that seems to make all the difference."

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