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In the Community

Healthcare with Compassion

by Pamela O'Malley Chang, CMCC volunteer acupuncturist

The Charlotte Maxwell Complementary Clinic treats cancer's side effects with integrative medicine and "an outpouring of love."

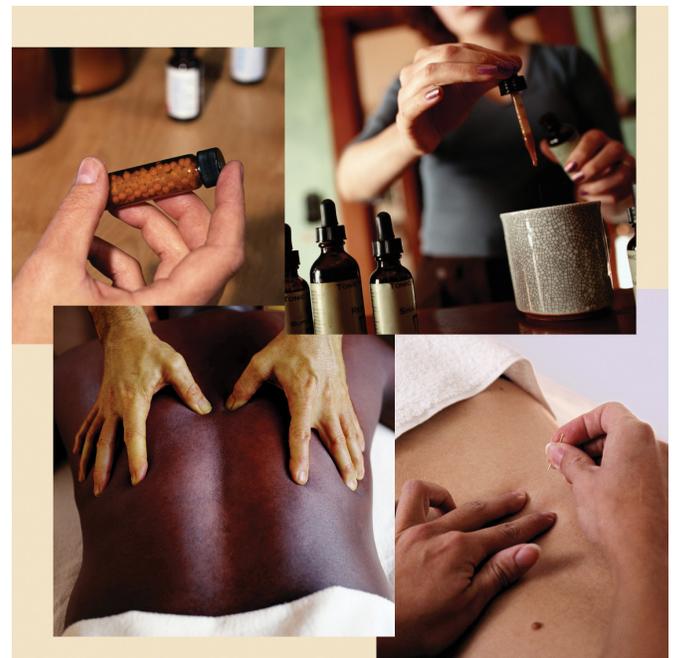


The Charlotte Maxwell Complementary Clinic is "a place of loving kindness that opens your heart, feeds your body, heals your soul. It's a place where everyone sustains and uplifts each other, creating a pocket of good energy that each woman takes as she leaves and spreads around." That's the philosophy of volunteer Casey F. who has worked at CMCC for 23 years.

Social worker Charlotte Maxwell, for whom the clinic is named, died of ovarian cancer in 1988 — but not before passing on her fierce belief that low-income women should have access to the acupuncture and herbal therapies that eased her final months. In 1989, six women pooled \$4,000 to found what would eventually become the Charlotte Maxwell Complementary Clinic (CMCC). In 1991, CMCC opened as a 501©3 state licensed public health clinic in Oakland, California, offering acupuncture, herbs, massage, homeopathy and guided imagery free of charge to underserved, low-income women with cancer. Now, 23 years later, there are two clinics- in downtown Oakland and San Francisco's Mission district. There is a small paid staff and over 400 volunteer practitioners, interpreters, and drivers, helping over 800 clients cope with the physical, spiritual, and social side effects of cancer.

Bread and roses

On clinic days, CMCC's waiting rooms have the ambience of a neighborhood social. An overstuffed sofa and armchairs line three walls. A long table along the fourth wall and a



coffee table are laden with baskets of fruits, vegetables, dip, and crusty loaves of bread. Buckets of flowers stand in the corner.

Sarah H., who comes from Nevada once a month to volunteer as support staff and driver, offers me a cup of tea as she explains that she has just picked up donations of organic produce from Full Belly Farms and bread from Whole Foods. Nothing here speaks of 'clinic' except perhaps the corner bookshelves that house a lending library of cancer related titles.

Shortly, the room fills, mostly with mid-life and older women. Every client accepted at CMCC is a low-income woman with a cancer diagnosis, and each is offered free treatments, herbs and nutritional supplements, and safety net social services such as emergency funds, transportation and language interpretation. There is also an in-home comfort care program for women who are at the end-of-life stage with their cancer.

Except for their name tags, the volunteer practitioners are indistinguishable from clients. Elena C., a client with

ovarian cancer, is waiting for an acupuncture treatment to help build her immunity and overcome the side effects of chemotherapy. Elena said she used to get nauseous just anticipating chemotherapy sessions. She would go to patient support groups but would just absorb everyone else's complaints and feel worse. At CMCC by contrast, people come out of treatment smiling.

"Here, they welcomed me, made me feel like family, helped me communicate better with my family," she said. "They taught me how to visualize my fear of chemotherapy... as a black ball in the middle of my chest that I could lift out and throw into the ocean... People touch you like they love you; they give you food and love. Anything I can say about this place won't be enough."

Robyn G. echoes Elena. CMCC is "love, an outpouring of love." Before she was diagnosed with 'galloping' inflammatory breast cancer, a rare and highly malignant cancer, Robyn was a jewelry artist. After super-aggressive treatment, she now has arthritis, nerve damage, and edema and can no longer grip her jeweler's tools. She characterizes conventional cancer treatment as barbaric.

"You're held hostage by cancer, by the diagnosis, by the treatment. Chemotherapy may save your life, but it may devastate the life you knew."

Robyn receives acupuncture, lymph drainage massage, reiki, and guided imagery treatments, none of which she would be able to afford without CMCC. Two years post-diagnosis, she is grateful to be alive, and she's starting to find ways to create art again.

Enough to spread around

In an orientation meeting, staff members review a client's medical records with her to make sure that she understands her options for both conventional and complementary integrative medicine (CIM) treatments. The clinic offers CIM therapies only -- acupuncture, Chinese and Western herbs, homeopathy, massage, and guided imagery -- to help relieve pain and the fatigue, nausea, nerve damage, and other side effects of chemotherapy and radiation. CMCC's care includes helping clients meet basic survival needs: social service benefits, housing, legal aid, emergency funds, and, in one case, a bed of their own for the children of a sleep-deprived patient.

CMCC social services advocates also provide written summaries of CIM treatments to help a client communicate with her conventional-care doctors. In addition, the clinic provides home-visits to house-bound patients, transportation to and from the clinic, food,



Pamela O'Malley Chang with patient

and education programs, all provided by volunteers or supported by donations from individuals, local businesses, and private foundations.

Winding up their day at CMCC, clients each pack a bag of produce and bread and make a flower arrangement to take home. Sarah returns from driving a client home smiling cheerfully. Sarah learned about CMCC at a kayaking fundraiser event, then stayed to volunteer. She enjoys sharing in a community where "everyone speaks openly" and where she can be among strongly motivated people who face cancer. "They add so much to our lives," she says.

As I leave my clinic shift, I find myself smiling and cheerful, too. Casey F. is right -- I've partaken of CMCC's good energy and am eager to spread it around.

For more on the Charlotte Maxwell Complementary Clinic, please go to www.charlottemaxwell.org and www.facebook.com/pages/Charlotte-Maxwell-Complementary-Clinic/207353102717489

Bio:

Pamela O'Malley Chang is a licensed acupuncturist and co-founder of Sarana Community Acupuncture in Albany, California.