

IN WITH BOTH FEET: Developing an evidence base for Reflexology in a Cancer Day Unit

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Recently the Board members of the International Psycho-Oncology Society unanimously endorsed the concept that Distress be named the 6th Vital Sign in Oncology. Pain is the 5th Vital Sign.

Vital signs are an essential part of a patient's case presentation. Prevalence rates of Distress in cancer patient populations have been well documented in the literature along with the impact of distress on cancer patients and their carers.

Stories from cancer patients revealed that receiving chemotherapy treatment in a Cancer Day Unit of a major teaching hospital was for many a distressing experience. Crowded waiting rooms were a highly anxious environment. First time chemo-patients were distressed and they told of treatments being physically and emotionally draining.

In response to this SolarisCare began a pilot project of providing Reflexology to patients and their carers in the Cancer Day Unit. As a means of introducing the project reflexology was administered to all staff as a way of experiencing the relaxation response to this therapy. Reflexology was offered two mornings a week, due to its success, it is now offered three mornings. On average ten patients each morning received reflexology whilst receiving their chemotherapy treatment.

In documenting this project a qualitative questionnaire seeking the nurse's perceptions of providing reflexology for patients has provided evidence of reduction of distress for patients. Data from patients was gathered by an interview prior to their first reflexology session and after their sixth. They completed a Symptom Assessment Scale (SAS) and a Quality-of-Life assessment, both are validated instruments. Physical symptoms such as lower blood pressure, lower pain scales and psychosocial measures including distress levels have shown marked reduction. This raises the question about how the provision of complementary therapies, in this case reflexology can be integrated into conventional practice to improve patient's outcomes.