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# Healing touch - Outer Banks hospital brings holistic complementary therapy to cancer unit - inner banks

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*By Maggie Miles Correspondent July 16, 2021 Publication: Virginian-Pilot, The (Norfolk, VA) Page: 18E Word Count: 750*

Donna Cahill, a nurse from San Diego, California, practiced healing touch therapy - a relaxing, nurturing, heart-centered energy therapy that uses gentle, intentional touch to assist in balancing physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing - with patients at her hospital for about 20 years before retiring to the Outer Banks in September of 2018.

Classified as a biofield therapy and nursing intervention by the National Institute of Health, healing touch therapy had a huge community in San Diego. Nonprofit organization Healing Beyond Borders taught people in program and maintained lots of active members and mentors.

When Cahill left San Diego for North Carolina, she thought, "OK - I need to find my tribe!"

It wasn't easy to find. There were a few practitioners in Virginia and western North Carolina but

no trace of this specialized therapy across the Outer Banks. Cahill joined the Outer Banks Women's Club in January of 2019. Dr. Christina Bowen, Dare County's only integrative medicine doctor and medical director of The Outer Banks Hospital Center for Healthy Living, happened to be giving that month's presentation.

Cahill raised her hand and asked Bowen if she had anybody that practiced healing touch therapy. According to Cahill, Bowen got excited, and said, "No, but you do?"

This interaction led to the creation of the Healing Touch Volunteer Program at the Outer Banks Hospital for their cancer services department. Cahill led the initiative, joined by three volunteers who had overheard the interaction at the Outer Banks Women's Club. She and the hospital staff aimed to make the service available to patients who had recently been diagnosed with cancer, and those undergoing chemo treatments could also receive healing touch therapy.

Today the program has three active members, including Cahill, and they hold training sessions periodically for those interested in volunteering.

"Healing touch is really a heart-centered therapy. It's about creating a bond with the client that is really all about unconditional love and compassion and helping them with their individual healing. Because all healing is self healing," Cahill says.

If a patient expresses interest in participating in healing touch therapy, a volunteer will talk with them to learn about any side effects from their chemo treatments and determine the most effective therapy plan for that individual. According to Cahill, as with reiki, energy balancing needs to occur with healing touch therapy. The volunteers talk with the patient and demonstrate what the healing touch feels like to make sure they are comfortable with it. Practitioners explain that they will be working on patients' bodies as well as in the space around it, in their energy field and

chakras. Ultimately, this will make them more relaxed.

"We don't know how it works, but we know it does. There are so many benefits that happen when you can get someone into that relaxation phase," Cahill says.

In fact, there is much research showing the benefits. According to the Healing Beyond Borders website, it is beneficial for calming anxiety and reducing symptoms of depression, decreasing pain, strengthening the immune system, enhancing recovery from surgery, complementing care for neck and spine problems, deepening spiritual connection, supporting cancer care, creating a sense of wellbeing and easing acute and chronic conditions

Cahill has seen some patient's pain vanish during a session. Many patients come back telling her how much better they feel in general.

This therapy works alongside standard medical care; it doesn't replace it.

According to the research, healing touch also supports resilience in healthcare providers. Cahill agrees that healing touch is about the self-care of the practitioner as well as the patient. It's about setting intentions and using the hands to guide you to bring balance to the heart's center. The Healing Touch Volunteer Program at the Outer Banks Hospital is growing slowly, however, the practice's benefits to nurses, physicians, hospital staff, patients and families are causing a ripple effect.

If you are interested in becoming a Healing Touch volunteer, Cahill and the Outer Banks Hospital give training classes in the modality. There is a cost to get the training, but according to

Cahill, the rewards of working with the clients is priceless.

"Holding hands, putting hands on someone is such a human connection that it really is a comforting feeling. For a nurse, this is really what holistic nursing is all about," says Cahill.

"That's why in retirement I just feel strongly about giving back in a way that is as compassionate as possible."

If you would like to get more information about becoming a volunteer or client, email Cahill at [donna.holisticcare@gmail.com](mailto:donna.holisticcare@gmail.com).

Donna Cahill leads the Healing Touch Volunteer Program at Outer Banks Hospital. Donna Cahill/courtesy

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