

Internet Helps Cancer Patients Cope

NEW YORK (Reuters) -- Traditional support groups help cancer survivors bear the burden of their illnesses. Now, online networks -- so-called "cyber solace" -- can offer many of the same benefits and more, according to a study at the University of Delaware (UD).

Advantages to participating in online chat with other cancer survivors and their families include 24-hour availability -- even to homebound patients -- and an offer of anonymity that may be appealing to some, said lead researcher Dr. Paula Klemm, assistant professor and assistant chairperson of nursing at UD. Her study was published in the January/February issue of *Computers in Nursing*.

Internet support groups also attract both sexes in equal numbers. At traditional hospital support groups, women outnumber men four to one, according to Klemm.

However, "cyber solace" lacks comforting one-to-one personal contact, and whatever a patient writes is not really private, Klemm said. Participation in online groups also presumes computer literacy and no visual impairment.

Klemm examined the contents of 300 messages to an Internet support group for those with colon cancer -- a disease that affects both sexes. She discovered that the message content fell into eight categories: information giving and seeking; personal opinions; encouragement and support; relating of personal experiences by patients and caregivers; notes of thanks; humor; prayer; and miscellaneous.

Approximately one-quarter of the messages involved giving and seeking information. Klemm noted that a previously expressed concern among medical professionals and others about online groups -- the spread of medical and other misinformation -- was largely unfounded in her study group. Online support participants appeared to be "very well-versed in their disease and, for every

person who might post inaccurate information, there are at least five others who will correct it," she stated in a press release.

People involved in such chats become "as close as it is possible to be to someone over the Internet," said Klemm. "People send expressions of grief.... It's like having someone send you a cyber-hug."

Twelve million US homes have Internet access today. That number is expected to rise to 40 million in the near future, allowing many more cancer patients to utilize resources for online support, said Klemm.

SOURCE: Computers in Nursing 1998;1:31-36.