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Innovation in Transplant Care

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Transplant care is inevitably seen as 'high tech' care. It certainly qualifies as such considering the invasive procedures, the complex medication regimens and the requisite modification of lifestyles that accompany any transplant. But in transplant, as in other areas of health care, there is heightened interest on the part of patients and family members in what is known as 'integrative care,' which involves the select use of complementary/alternative medicine (also known as CAM) in addition to traditional medical therapy. Health care providers across the spectrum of medical specialties are also becoming aware of some of the benefits of these complementary therapies

in the care of their patients. Once considered anathema to the allopathic medical community, some homeopathic techniques are being actively pursued in medical centers across the country.

At UC San Diego Medical Center we are beginning to see the application of 'integrative care' techniques. Several nurses have become certified in the application of healing touch, a complementary therapeutic option that is intended to promote stress reduction, relaxation and relief of discomfort. Doulas in the peripartum areas use massage and other techniques to enhance the delivery experience for new mothers. Acupuncture and acupressure are being used along



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with usual medical therapies for relief of pain and other symptoms. There is a whole discipline referred to as 'Integrative Oncology' which applies many of these nontraditional techniques to help relieve symptoms in cancer patients being treated with traditional chemotherapy and radiation.

Clearly the transplant patient faces a number of unique stressors along with the everyday stress we all encounter. Chronic illness, such as End Stage Renal disease (ESRD), or life altering hemodialysis or peritoneal dialysis are the tip of the iceberg. Patients worry about coping day to day, as well as whether the lifesaving organs will come in time. They struggle with loss of function, loss of income, changes in physical appearance, and even their position in the family. The transplant brings a new set of concerns. In an attempt to meet the needs of the diverse and complicated customer population of kidney and pancreas transplantation, the social worker and nursing staff of the UCSD Center for Transplantation Kidney and Kidney/Pancreas program have joined forces and are exploring nontraditional methods of dealing with some of the complaints of this unique group.

As an initial step, on August 11,

2009 Dr Steven Hickman, a clinical psychologist in the UCSD Department of Psychiatry, was invited to be a guest presenter at the kidney and kidney/pancreas patient support group. Dr. Hickman has extensive training and experience in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and is the Director of the UCSD Center for Mindfulness. According to Dr. Hickman "mindfulness is the moment-to-moment awareness invoked by tuning into your breath and to every other aspect of your life. It has been shown to bring about lasting decreases in both physical and psychological symptoms, as well as enhanced quality of life. " Training in mindfulness incorporates ancient techniques, including meditation, breathing and relaxation skills, and a gentle form of yoga and stretching. Regular practice has been shown to reduce perceived stress, to improve sleep, and to increase awareness of what is going on internally and externally in a person's life.

To achieve the benefit of mindfulness training takes practice on a daily basis over time. Dr. Hickman introduced the 30 attendees at the Kidney and Kidney/Pancreas program support group to the first step of focusing on breathing and introducing the concept of meditation, as they tried to turn off

"mental noise." Attendees were very enthusiastic about this first exposure to complementary medicine and how it made them feel. They expressed interest in exploring other practices. Some potential topics under consideration for future support groups include acupuncture, guided imagery, chi gong, healing touch and massage therapy.

Clearly there is potential for helping patients as they cope with transplant related stressors through integrative medicine. One of the most important benefits is the empowerment of patients to actively participate in their care, to bring about improvement through their own actions. There are few side effects. They can practice the techniques at their leisure. And they feel better! Transplant offers a better quality of life for these very sick patients. It may be that increased self awareness and decreased stress will help them to realize the full potential of the transplant intervention.