



The Healing Touch

Safe, therapeutic touch extends the Caring Tradition to patients, families and staff.

Massage Therapy Brings Comfort at Sentara Martha Jefferson

Few experiences in life are scarier and more stressful than intensive cancer treatment. Carolyn Dawson knows this all too well, having fought both lung and breast cancer at Sentara Martha Jefferson Hospital's Phillips Cancer Center over the past decade. In addition to surgery and chemotherapy, she has endured twice-daily radiation treatments, which required her to lay completely immobile on a steel table, staring

up at the machines that were blasting her body with radiation.

To calm the anxiety caused by her illness and treatments, Dawson often timed her appointments around the schedule of Sentara Martha Jefferson's massage therapist team, whose gentle, healing touch helped to quiet her mind and ease her bodily tension.

"Having 15 minutes to sit down and take a breath after treatment made such a difference,"

Dawson recalls. “Sometimes you just sit there and don’t say anything, or you want to talk about what’s going on, and the massage team is so sympathetic and understanding. It’s an incredibly valuable service, and I’m so grateful for the community support that makes it possible.”

Thankfully, Dawson is now cancer-free, although she still grapples with osteoarthritis and other aftereffects of treatment. “It’s been a long road, and they’ve been there the whole time,” she says.

Rebecca T. Getz, RN, LMT, architect of the massage program and a 43-year Sentara Martha Jefferson veteran, has become a friend to Dawson over the years. “We chat, and she gets a knot out of my neck, and I leave feeling rejuvenated after my 15 minutes of ‘Becky time.’ Her wonderful attitude and compassion are infectious. She’s just the person you need in this type of situation.”

The Heart of the Caring Tradition

Community generosity through the Martha Jefferson Hospital Foundation makes it possible for Getz and her team of four part-time massage therapists—Kate Hall, Cora Houghton, Alexa Matthews and Cecilia Mills—to provide 280 hours of free massage monthly to patients, families and hospital staff.

“It really is the heart of the Caring Tradition,” says Sylvia Hendrix, MD, a Sentara Martha Jefferson radiation oncologist. “You don’t need massage therapy to get accredited or to achieve wonderful outcomes, but the patient experience is so integral to care. When you’re in Becky’s chair, she’s taking care of you, and you feel like your life is a little lighter.”

That appreciation led Dr. Hendrix and other forward-looking hospital leaders and physicians to champion massage at the hospital back in the 1990s, before quantitative

research had demonstrated the therapeutic power of safe touch to ease pain and anxiety, and to support other medical interventions.

Getz’s irresistible warmth, humor and dedication make her a powerful advocate for the program as well. Massage and other holistic modalities helped her beloved husband, Brad, fight lymphoma, so she knows firsthand how important healing touch can be for those going through cancer treatment.

Today the massage program is an essential component of the hospital’s commitment to caring for the whole person. Getz’s team members take their time with patients, listening to and supporting them as they work out the knots and tension in sore shoulders and clenched hands.

The impact of their efforts is often visible and immediate. “Being in a constant state of fight-or-flight, as patients and families so often are, isn’t supportive to healing,” observes Peggy Bishop, NP, palliative care team coordinator. Bishop’s team supports some of the sickest patients in the system, as well as some of the oldest, working closely with family members to create a holistic plan that helps improve patient quality of life.



Sentara Martha Jefferson’s massage therapists have helped Carolyn Dawson manage pain and anxiety during her decadelong battle with cancer.



Community support enables Becky Getz and her team to provide regular massage therapy to help hospital staff manage stress and prevent workplace injury.

“Aging people with serious illness often become disenfranchised,” says Bishop, noting that massage takes on added importance when “tender, loving touch is otherwise absent from patients’ lives.”

Even a few minutes with a skilled therapist can be remarkably restorative, bringing down the level of fear to a place where patients and families can have necessary conversations about quality of life. Getz and her teammates often attend palliative care team meetings, recognizing that family members frequently share important information with them that would otherwise go unsaid.

Healing the Healers

Getz and her teammates are also beloved among Sentara Martha Jefferson’s staff, who rely on massage to relieve sore muscles, cure headaches and find a few minutes of respite. Thanks to community support through the Staff Resiliency and Wellness Fund, the team now has the funding to provide monthly massage events for staff, as well as round on all hospital departments and Sentara medical offices.

The unique perspective of the massage team gives them a true appreciation for the challenges of frontline medical work. “For instance, radiology team members have to wear heavy lead protective gear for hours each workday, and you can see the toll that weight takes on their shoulders over time.”

Imaging techs also feel the effects of the physical nature of their daily work, spending hours putting strain on their hands, wrists, shoulders and neck muscles while reaching over wide beds and torquing their bodies into uncomfortable positions. Many longtime sonographers, unfortunately, deal with pain on a daily basis.

Ann Brown, RVT, RDMS, RDCS, team coordinator for general and vascular ultrasound and a 19-year veteran of the Sentra Martha Jefferson imaging team, considers massage vital for managing pain and maintaining the physical flexibility she needs in order to do her job. Brown, who pays for regular massages outside of work, considers the on-site therapy provided by Getz’s team to be an important supplement.

“The community’s support of this program helps to keep me working,” Brown says. “Massage helps keep me and other members of our team from having to be out on worker’s comp. It’s amazing how much 10 minutes of massage a week can do to help your muscles and joints stay loose and prevent injuries.”

For her part, Getz sees it as a calling to share her gift for healing touch with as many people as she can. “I give a lot, but I get it back tenfold,” she says. “I feel like I’ve found my niche. You should see the difference it makes.”