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Structured support for cancer survivors 'reduces side effects'

Samantha Boh

A structured programme for breast cancer survivors, tested here for the first time, has been shown to drastically reduce post-treatment side effects like fatigue, appetite loss and body aches.

The trial was conducted by researchers from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS) to lobby for greater support for cancer survivors here.

Many of them are unable to comprehend and manage treatment and post-treatment side effects, said NUS Associate Professor Alexandre Chan, who co-led the trial.

He said support groups, while present, offer only random help.

What is needed is a structured and targeted programme that brings together experts from various fields, including pharmacists, dietitians and social workers, to discuss issues from exercise to sexuality, added Prof Chan.

Breast cancer survivor Lily Lee, 53, told The Straits Times what she needed most while undergoing treatment last year was to have her questions answered by professionals, and meet other breast cancer patients and survivors.

"I had so much information about cancer from the Internet and friends but yet I felt lost," she said.

The former administrator was one of 72 breast cancer patients and survivors who took part in a trial run by NUS and the NCCS psychosocial oncology department to see if a structured cancer support programme would be effective.

Half of the patients were given a booklet on chemotherapy and its side effects, as is the practice now. The others, including Madam Lee, went through three "survivor support" sessions of 4 1/2 hours each.

They were taught about post-treatment symptoms and how to manage them, and had their questions answered by healthcare professionals. They also interacted with others living with cancer.

Through the programme, run from August last year to January this year, Madam Lee said she was better able to prepare herself for the pins and needles she still feels in her hands and feet, half a year after she completed cancer therapy.

The participants were surveyed on their mental and physical well-being before and after intervention. Results showed that those in the programme had large improvements in areas like fatigue, appetite loss and physical distress.

Dr Gilbert Fan from NCCS said programmes can be tailored to the needs of participants. Breast cancer survivors, for example, tend to have concerns with body image.

"These rather personal and sensitive issues are better discussed in a closed group like a structured programme planned to heighten the survivors' illness coping and management skills," he said.

The NCCS is already planning similar structured programmes for people with hereditary cancers, as well as adolescents and young adults with cancer.

Prof Chan, who was scheduled to present the findings at the American Society Of Clinical Oncology Annual Meeting yesterday in Chicago, hopes his study will lead to a structured programme for cancer patients and survivors here.

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