

## **Development of Psycho-Oncology Services for Cancer Patients, Survivors, and their Family Members in Guam**

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Circle of Care Cancer Support and Psycho-Oncology Services<sup>1</sup>

Receiving a cancer diagnosis can be an extremely challenging event in one's life. While coping with the initial shock of being diagnosed with cancer, patients must quickly learn about their disease and how to navigate the available treatment options. In Guam, the stress of being diagnosed with cancer is compounded by the limited range of oncology services available on the island and the need to consider receiving medical treatment off-island, especially for rare, complex, or advanced cancers. Thus, many of our island's cancer patients have to negotiate the complexities of receiving diagnostic and treatment services both in Guam and elsewhere (e.g., the Philippines, the US mainland, Hawai'i). In the US mainland and throughout the international community, psycho-oncology services—including specialized counseling, therapy, and support groups—play an important role in helping patients make treatment decisions, manage

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### <sup>1</sup> **Author Note**

The program described in this article is supported by a grant from the Guam Cancer Trust Fund. The authors would like to thank the Guam Cancer Trust Fund, Payless Markets Community Foundation, and the Circle of Care participants for their assistance with developing the program. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Iain K. B. Twaddle (Email: [psychology4785@triton.uog.edu](mailto:psychology4785@triton.uog.edu))

symptoms and treatment side effects, and learn to cope with the emotional stress of living with cancer. Yet, these services were not available in Guam until recently. This article outlines the development of a psycho-oncology services program to meet the mental health needs of cancer patients, survivors, and their family members in Guam.

### **What Is Psycho-Oncology and Why Is It a Critical Component of Cancer Care?**

Psycho-oncology is a branch of oncology that focuses on the psychological, emotional, and social needs of cancer patients and their caregivers. In the 1950s, oncologists began considering the psychological needs of patients diagnosed with advanced cancer. In the 1970s, psychiatrist Jimmie Holland founded the field of psycho-oncology after creating the first psychiatric service for cancer patients at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. Since then, the discipline of psycho-oncology has grown substantially and is now an established component of many major medical centers worldwide (Breitbart et al., 2021).

Research has shown that psychological distress is highly prevalent among cancer patients, including depression, anxiety, anger, poor sleep, poor appetite, poor concentration, fear and worry about the future, concerns with treatment side effects, concerns about social roles, and preoccupation with thoughts of illness and death (National Comprehensive Cancer Network, 2024; Ostovar et al., 2022). These distress symptoms are associated with lower quality of life, impairment in social relationships, lower patient-reported quality of care, reduced treatment compliance, and lower survival rates (Abdelhadi, 2023; Grassi, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Due to these concerns, the International Psycho-Oncology Society has called for the recognition of psychosocial cancer care as a critical component of oncology services (Grassi, 2020).

Psycho-oncology helps patients to cope with the psychological distress they may experience at various stages of their cancer journey, including the initial shock of

receiving a cancer diagnosis, emotional challenges faced during treatment, concerns about treatment side effects, and fear of recurrence. Furthermore, psycho-oncology can help cancer patients manage the socio-economic aspects of cancer such as accessing cancer treatment services, navigating insurance eligibility and coverage, and coping with financial and housing instability. As family members often experience distress themselves when their loved one is diagnosed with cancer, psycho-oncology also addresses the needs of family members and caregivers. Psycho-oncology interventions for cancer patients and their families include: screening and assessment for distress, anxiety, depression, and cognitive problems; behavioral management of physical symptoms such as pain, nausea, fatigue, disrupted sleep, and poor appetite; treatment of comorbid psychiatric disorders such as adjustment disorders, anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, and substance use disorders; individual psychological counseling and psychotherapy (e.g., supportive therapies, cognitive and behavioral therapies, mindfulness-based therapies); play therapy and creative arts therapies for children and adolescents; family and couples therapies; support groups and group psychotherapy; integrative oncology (e.g., mind-body practices, natural products, lifestyle modifications); and meaning-centered interventions for advanced cancer and end-of-life care (Breitbart et al., 2021; Witt et al., 2017).

### **The Need for Psycho-Oncology Services in Guam**

The incidence of cancer in Guam is significant, with an average of 381 new diagnoses and 161 cancer-related deaths annually (UOG Guam Cancer Registry, 2020). Yet, Guam has a shortage of cancer care specialists and treatment services due to its remote location and relatively small population. While access to oncology treatment services (e.g., surgery, chemotherapy, radiation) has improved in recent years, the critical need for programs addressing the psychological distress cancer patients and their families experience is still largely unmet. As previously mentioned, this gap in psychosocial care can adversely affect treatment compliance and overall health

outcomes. It is therefore important to establish psycho-oncology services in Guam to help cancer patients navigate treatment decisions, manage symptoms and treatment side effects, develop coping strategies for psychological distress, and reduce caregiver burnout. Investing in these services is essential not only for improving patient well-being but also for enhancing the overall efficacy of cancer treatment on the island.

### **Program Development**

In 2024, to meet the need for specialized psychological support services for cancer patients, survivors, and their family members in Guam, the authors established a comprehensive psycho-oncology program, including both in-person and telehealth services. The program is provided by Payless Markets Community Foundation through a grant from the Guam Cancer Trust Fund and is named *Circle of Care Cancer Support and Psycho-Oncology Services*. Both the name of the program and its vision were adopted from the second author's *Circle of Care Mind, Body, Spirit Wellness Program*, which provided support services to cancer patients, their families, and caregivers in Guam from 2016 to 2019.

The current program has seven components: (1) weekly online cancer support groups; (2) bimonthly in-person cancer support groups; (3) specialized support groups for specific types of cancer; (4) individual and family psycho-oncology counseling; (5) integrative oncology health and wellness services; (6) psycho-oncology services for children and adolescents; and (7) peer support services. These services are facilitated by a licensed clinical psychologist, a community educator, a clinical psychology associate, and four assistant facilitators. All services are provided free of charge. Participants are referred to the program from cancer treatment centers and other medical clinics across the island. Each service is explained below.

#### ***Weekly Online Cancer Support Groups***

Weekly online cancer support groups are held every Tuesday evening for two hours on Zoom. The online format ensures easy access for a wide range of cancer patients, survivors, and their family members living in Guam. Cancer care specialists from the community are invited to give presentations on cancer support services available in Guam during the first hour of each online group session, including oncologists, other healthcare professionals involved in cancer care, social service professionals who provide assistance to cancer patients, and cancer survivors. In the second hour, the facilitators integrate peer support with behavioral health interventions and psychoeducation to provide psycho-oncology care in a support group format addressing: (a) challenges associated with adjusting to the illness; (b) managing cancer symptoms such as pain and fatigue; (c) making diagnostic and treatment decisions; (d) learning how to access available services; (e) coping with the stress of medical treatment; (f) managing treatment side effects; and (g) learning to cope with the emotional stress of living with cancer.

### ***Bimonthly In-Person Cancer Support Groups***

In-person cancer support groups are held in a community-based setting in Hagåtña for three and a half hours on the first and third Saturday of each month. The in-person format provides an opportunity for participants to meet face-to-face with the group facilitators and the other participants, thus strengthening key aspects of communication and social connection that are central to effective support groups. Like the online groups, the in-person groups provide psycho-oncology care through a combination of peer support, behavioral health interventions, and psychoeducation addressing the various challenges faced by cancer patients (as outlined in the previous section). The first 90 minutes of each in-person session focus on group sharing, followed by an hour of restorative yoga, and a final hour featuring art therapy or oncology nutrition education. A light lunch and snacks utilizing foods known to reduce the risk of cancer are served to create a healthy, supportive, and patient-centered environment.

### ***Specialized Support Groups for Specific Types of Cancer***

In addition to the online and in-person cancer support groups, the Circle of Care program plans to provide specialized support groups focusing on specific types of cancer (e.g., breast, lung, prostate, colorectal) and stages of cancer (e.g., early, advanced) in 2025. These dedicated support groups will bring together cancer patients with similar diagnoses to provide support services that are tailored to their unique needs.

### ***Individual and Family Psycho-Oncology Counseling***

The Circle of Care program also provides individual and family psycho-oncology counseling for cancer patients and their family members who need personalized support as they go through their cancer journey. Initial sessions focus on learning about the patient's type and stage of cancer, treatment options, psychological adjustment, coping strengths, and support needs, as well as the experiences of any family members attending the session. Subsequent sessions concentrate on providing specialized care tailored to meet each participant's unique needs based on the initial assessment. Several therapeutic approaches are used including cognitive-behavioral, humanistic-existential, narrative, family systems, and psychoeducation. Sessions are conducted both in-person and through telehealth.

### ***Integrative Oncology Health and Wellness Services***

Circle of Care offers a holistic approach to healing and stress reduction through integrative oncology health and wellness services conducted by cancer care specialists from the community. The program currently provides restorative yoga, art therapy, and oncology nutrition education as part of the Saturday in-person support group sessions. Tai chi and qi gong sessions are also offered on weekday mornings. These services are designed to bring persons with cancer together, foster community, educate, and offer effective coping tools to help navigate the disease process. Future session topics may

include mindfulness meditation, music therapy, massage therapy, therapeutic journaling, stress management, and sleep hygiene.

### ***Psycho-Oncology Services for Children and Adolescents***

Circle of Care currently offers support services to help children and adolescents cope with a family member's struggle with cancer. In 2025, the program also plans to add psycho-oncology services addressing the needs of children and adolescents diagnosed with pediatric cancer. These services will include pediatric cancer support groups, child and adolescent psycho-oncology counseling, family psycho-oncology counseling, and integrative oncology health and wellness services focused on the needs of children and adolescents with cancer and their families.

### ***Peer Support Services***

Circle of Care's peer support services connect cancer patients with a volunteer who has completed treatment for a similar type of cancer. Peer support volunteers provide confidential assistance by sharing their own experiences with cancer treatment, offering information and guidance, and being available for emotional support by phone, online, or in person. To ensure the effectiveness of these services, a peer support training program is being developed focused on psychoeducation, active listening, and communication skills.

### **Conclusion**

In its first six months, Circle of Care Cancer Support and Psycho-Oncology Services has quickly grown into a thriving support community with approximately 150 cancer patients, survivors, and their family members. The program has brought together participants struggling with a wide range of cancers, providing a sense of community and support as they go through their cancer journey. While emphasis is placed on helping current cancer patients to cope with the challenges associated with ongoing cancer treatment, the program also assists cancer survivors seeking support as they

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struggle with long-term side effects and strive to prevent recurrence. In addition, family members regularly participate in the program, accompanying their loved ones to support group sessions and seeking support themselves as they learn to cope with the challenges that come with caring for a loved one with cancer. Circle of Care's high participation rate demonstrates the value and effectiveness of the program's services.



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