As the College of Nursing celebrates 60 years of building better futures, it’s natural to reflect on where we’ve been and where we’re headed. Over the years we’ve become known nationwide for our academic excellence, with top rankings for our innovative online graduate nursing programs like our Master of Science and Doctor of Nursing Practice programs. But that’s only part of the story. As we move boldly into the future, we’re placing special emphasis on three of our distinguishing focal areas: cancer survivorship and prevention, health informatics, and integrative health. In this issue you’ll learn more about our cancer prevention and survivorship focus. Our stories spotlight the unique cancer recovery research we’re conducting, such as using mindfulness to reduce stress and promote healing, preventing depression through telephone guidance for Latina breast cancer patients and uncovering knowledge for helping nurses provide better care for Native American cancer patients.

Mind Over Cancer: Compassion Meditation

Cancer survivors respond to stress in various detrimental ways, including elevated anxiety and depression as well as physical changes such as higher blood pressure, heart rate and blood sugar levels. These and other factors negatively impact the quality of life and can reduce recovery and prevention of reoccurrences for people already dealing with debilitating health issues. But the mind may hold a key to putting the body into a better healing state.

Compassion meditation is a centuries-old practice meant to improve emotional and physical wellbeing, but thanks to recent scientific inquiry into integrative therapies, it may find its way into contemporary cancer survivorship healing programs. In patients coping with cancer and their home caregivers alike, UA College of Nursing Assistant Professor Thaddeus Pace is applying a specific compassion meditation technique called CBCT® (Cognitively-Based Compassion Training) and tracking its impact on emotional and physical stress-related indicators.

He hopes his new study will build solid scientific evidence to back up this integrative wellness strategy for breast cancer survivors and their close family members and friends. Participants will learn how to adapt their mind-body state by attending instructor-guided meditation sessions with expectations to also practice at home.

“If we show broad effectiveness of this program we could work to have compassion meditation as a therapy available in every major cancer center,” Pace said. “People’s lives change because of cancer treatments. They can knock back tumors but they can’t always escape the sledgehammer effects cancer has on brain functions like cognition and behavior. Long term, people arrive at a new normal which is often subpar. The goal in survivorship intervention work is to arrive at a new normal that’s optimal for high quality of life.”
Surviving cancer comes with a burden of multiple symptoms (pain, fatigue, nausea, among others) triggered by the disease and its necessary medical treatments, often chemotherapy or radiation. To feel better, cancer survivors search for symptom management strategies. But how do patients know what is or is not likely to work for them? We gain such insights when scientists like UA College of Nursing Professor Alla Sikorskii set their minds to testing new therapies that are complementary to conventional medical ones (termed integrative health approaches) in the newest possible ways.

With a strong statistics background, Sikorski is well primed to lead her team to make the most of their Sequential Multiple Assignment Randomized Trial (SMART) design to test two integrative therapies, reflexology and meditative practice, with potential to improve symptom management in cancer patients. This might sound impenetrable to the layperson, but its simple intent is to improve the wellness of cancer patients. The SMART design allows for sequentially using more than one therapy, and based on continual analysis of participant responses as the trial progresses, creating a ‘best fit’ of therapy to recipient.

“SMART could have big implications for future cancer care, particularly when resources are limited,” said Dr. Sikorskii. “There are a variety of complementary therapies that can be employed in cancer care. The therapies we chose to test can be practiced at home and can therefore be low-cost, but depending on the person and context they could have varying effectiveness. SMARTs have the potential to help identify who needs the most and who would do just fine with the least intensive therapeutic approach.”

The upshot? Results will show which single therapy or additive therapies work best with people surviving cancer. Using her expertise in applied statistics, Sikorski revels in probing the data that will guide sequence of therapy exposure and ultimately reveal treatment plans that are better individualized for people.

Dialing Up Care for Latina Cancer Patients & Families

Awareness of depression as the world’s most common mental health disorder led directly to Professor Terry Badger’s clinical interest in psychosocial oncology interventions with cancer survivors and their families. Funded by the American Cancer Society, Badger’s telephone intervention is intended to strengthen the social and spiritual wellbeing of the historically underserved population of Latinas and their caregivers.

Why did you focus on the Latina population?
When we started working with our Latina population nobody was thinking about how to deliver care to Hispanic women and their caregivers. Latinas are a growing and particularly vulnerable population with regard to breast cancer, because they tend to be diagnosed at later stages, to be sicker and have fewer easily accessible resources to deal with their psychological distress.

Why focus on patients and their family caregiver?
Cancer is not just the patients’ illness. It’s really a family disease, because it alters roles, responsibilities and expectations and causes lots of depression and anxiety. During various phases of the cancer journey, caregivers make tremendous changes in their lives – they may change their work hours or they may have to leave their work entirely. It impacts the entire family.

Why did you choose the telephone as the intervention delivery device?
We needed to develop a way to deliver psychosocial oncology services counseling and education to survivors and their caregivers in a very accessible way. I realized that people with very low economic means may not have a computer and even if they do they might not have internet access. But even people who are very limited will have a cell phone with some minutes on it.

How does the study work?
We provide the telephone intervention once a week for 30 minutes and measure their progress along the way. We learned that we are able to effectively deal with their anxiety, depression and stress, but also that when we deal with those factors, other symptoms like fatigue and pain aren’t as severe.

How will the outcome of the study improve lives?
We have already begun to show that the intervention is effective in alleviating symptom distress, including decreasing depression, anxiety and other negative emotional and physical symptoms, and improving social and spiritual wellbeing. In the future we can envision this kind of telephone therapy being offered as part cancer survivor care bundles.
Featured Cancer Events & Resources

Beyond Cancer: Finding Spirit  
Saturday, Sept. 9, 2017

Join us for a special day focused on finding spirit and reclaiming your life after cancer treatment is over. Survivors, friends, family, caregivers and the Tucson community are all invited to discover a wide variety of resources, therapies and activities that promote healthy living and long-term wellbeing. Enjoy a keynote presentation from Miguel Flores Jr., LISAC, CSOTS, CEO/President of Holistic Wellness Counseling and Consultant Services. More info: nursing.arizona.edu/beyond-cancer-finding-spirit

Community Cancer Connections

Connecting cancer survivors and their families to local resources and services to improve their health and wellbeing, this community partnership, led by Mary Koithan, associate dean for student support and community engagement, promotes mind-body-spirit health and wellbeing, and serves as an online, central resource center for the cancer survivor community throughout Arizona. Visit: uacommunitycancerconnections.org

Tucson Cancer Action Network (TCAN)

TCAN is a community collaborative of health providers and cancer survivors focused on improving the health and wellbeing of those affected by cancer. This grass-roots effort emerged from an initial conversation in 2010 about the need for those working in cancer care to come together to identify service gaps and needs, share information about the state of cancer care in southern Arizona, and to act to improve the care being delivered. In 2014, we expanded the group to include survivors, their families and their friends, believing that together we can create a stronger, more vibrant and effective community. Learn more: nursing.arizona.edu/TCAN

Bridging Cultural Appreciation for Better Native American Cancer Care

A divide of culturally-influenced misunderstanding too often separates Native American cancer patients from the nurses who care for them. UA College of Nursing Assistant Professor Natalie Pool is working to close this divide using evidence-informed cultural safety training developed during her most recent research.

As a medical-surgical nurse serving cancer patients dealing with the side effects of cancer treatment or end-of-life issues on the White Mountain Apache and Northern Ute reservations, she became acutely aware of the challenges after observing a disproportionate number of Native American patients experiencing significant cancer complications.

Pool theorized that the key to improving the situation for patients and nurses alike was raising culture-specific knowledge in nurses. “What they require are the right tools,” said Pool. “In the interest of better long-term cancer care, most nurses want to be culturally respectful and have a meaningful connection with their patients regardless of their backgrounds. They want to partner effectively with other providers serving Native American people, such as social workers and traditional healers.”

Fueled by the results of the study, Pool advocates comprehensive and targeted cultural safety training designed to better equip nurses to provide culturally congruent care. “Improving the work satisfaction for the nurse will improve the patient’s experience as well,” she said.

Urging Massage Therapists to Lend Their Hands to Detect & Prevent Skin Cancer

Arizona is home to 10,000 actively licensed massage therapists, each of whom averages 12 clients per week or roughly 7,000 client encounters a year. What if in addition to soothing cramped muscles those massage therapists could be enlisted and trained to help reduce skin cancer risk?

UA College of Nursing Associate Professor Lois Loescher, aims to answer that question thanks to a three-year $750,000 award from Arizona Biomedical Research Commission to train massage therapists, with their unique access to lots of people's skin, to effectively communicate sun safety, identify and recognize suspicious skin lesions and provide resources for appropriate health-care follow-up for their clients.

The study aims to address, expand and evaluate the effectiveness of skin surveillance in an innovative way.

“We’re not suggesting that massage therapists should become dermatologists,” said Loescher. “All we’re doing is advocating for more eyes on the skin.” Currently, massage therapists receive little formal training on skin cancer so Loescher and her team are developing online training that could be successfully adopted by massage schools in Arizona and beyond.

Adapting a prior intervention developed by Loescher and her co-investigators, Myra Muramoto, MD, MPH, and Amy Howerter, PhD, from the UA College of Medicine – Tucson Department of Family and Community Medicine, the team will conduct pilot testing on 20 Tucson-based massage therapists. After fine-tuning the intervention, they will expand to a larger group of 80 massage therapists throughout Arizona. “Massage therapists often see their clients more than primary care providers see their patients,” said Loescher. “Our goal is to have a huge public-health impact in skin cancer prevention and early detection. Overall, we want to promote a larger role for skin cancer prevention within massage therapy school curricula and continuing education.”
Associate Dean for Research & Global Advances Usha Menon is working to increase mammography screening among Latinas in Arizona. With a $100,000 grant from the Breast Cancer Research Foundation, she and her co-PI are partnering with community organizations in and around the City of South Tucson and Nogales, Ariz., and engaging Spanish bi-lingual outreach coordinators with Latino culture knowledge to provide impactful educational information and materials that will promote uptake of mammography screening.