

## BRIEF COMMUNICATION

# COVID-19 changed everything for cancer patients: Supporting cancer patients during a health crisis—the Wellspring Model

by Judi Perry Brinkert and Margaret Valois

## INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has triggered a new health crisis for cancer patients. Cancelled surgeries, treatments and diagnostics, limited access to health professionals, and increased isolation have all served to heighten the already considerable mental and emotional toll on cancer patients and have significantly increased the need for supportive care.

Wellspring, a Canada-wide network of nine community-based centres, has been providing supportive care for cancer patients for the past 28 years. Wellspring's professionally-led emotional, psychosocial, physical and practical supportive care programs and services are for individuals with any type or stage of cancer, and their loved ones, at no charge and without a referral. Wellspring has ensured that access to these fundamentally critical supports remained a priority, despite the challenges of the pandemic crisis.

## MOVING TO THE DIGITAL SPACE

In a recent, exceptional move to ensure the uninterrupted availability of these supportive care programs, Wellspring quickly transitioned the majority of its programs, from in-centre and in-person, to an online

capacity. Initial concerns about the viability of online programming quickly disappeared when the advancement of COVID-19 necessitated the closure of all Wellspring centres and the cessation of in-person programming.

"It took me a couple of weeks to embrace a virtual form of delivering my practice," said Jillian Cook, RYT. "But being able to continue the classes, 'no matter what,' is crucial to so many. I feel gratified to be able to maintain a presence with the Wellspring community of members."

Earlier in 2019, Wellspring had tiptoed into virtual programming, in response to requests to provide supports for Canadians who did not have access to a physical centre. "In speaking with our constituents," said Judi Perry Brinkert, Chief Mission Officer with Wellspring, "there was a worry that we would lose something fundamental to the Wellspring experience, the hallmarks of which were the warmth and connection of the interactions. We had a modest plan for strategically growing this part of our services. Little did we know what was going to happen."

Now, all Wellspring programs are provided either as interactive video-conferenced groups, real-time webinars, self-paced videos or as audio or telephone-based programs and are available through a new website named Well on the Web ([www.wellspring.ca/online-programs](http://www.wellspring.ca/online-programs)). After researching many options, Zoom was selected as the platform of choice for video-conferencing. When security-related concerns emerged in the media about Zoom, Wellspring quickly adopted new protocols by utilizing all the security features

built into the software. Now, Wellspring controls who, how and when a person joins any program session. Also, every program has a staff host who provides needed logistical and technical support, thereby allowing the program leader to focus solely on engaging with the participants.

Interactive group sessions are limited to 20 participants, whereas the webinars can accommodate up to 500. The Wellspring network now sees more than 6,000 program visits monthly. "We had anticipated a significant learning curve," said Perry-Brinkert. "Instead, we've been surprised and delighted with how quickly and readily our members have adopted online programming." One Wellspring program participant shared, "This comes at a time where we are all struggling with a wide range of emotions, as we try to make sense of the world today. I think this new way of providing programming is especially helpful for those of us living with cancer and who already feel isolated."

In the first phase of transition, Wellspring offered continuations of mid-stream support groups and the Healing Journey. Coping strategy programs including Relaxation and Visualization, Yoga, Chi Life (an adaptation of qi gong that incorporates qi gong and tai chi) and Meditation quickly gained new and large audiences online.

In the later phases, more complex programs, such as Cancer Exercise and the Children's and Parents' Program, were adapted for online access. Peer Support requests are increasing and the program is now provided by way of private video-conferencing or telephone calls.

## AUTHOR NOTES

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## BENEFITS

Many patients have expressed appreciation for having access to programs from the safety and security of their homes. Those not feeling well can participate from the comfort of their beds, those with hearing loss can change the volume of the discussions to suit their individual needs, and those uncomfortable with changes in their physical appearance can participate with their cameras off.

Many of the program sessions are recorded, and posted afterwards as opportunities for self-paced learning. This is a highly popular option for individuals who are either unable or uncomfortable participating in group discussions, as well as for those who simply need a ‘refresher’ of the content provided. Many of Wellspring’s coping strategy and information-based programs are now being offered as self-paced learning options. Said one patient, “I just watched the webinar on chemo-induced peripheral neuropathy. It was so very informative,

well-organized and helpful. Thank you for providing it. I must now follow the advice, and get out for a walk!”

Wellspring partnered with Media Platforms, who undertook responsibility for editing and branding the multiple weekly recordings that have now become the self-paced webinar section of Well on the Web. Patients and or caregivers are currently viewing these videos more than 2,200 times each month.

As a network of affiliated centres across the country, each Wellspring centre focuses on their respective communities’ unique needs and opportunities. The changes brought about by the pandemic have resulted in the organization working together more cooperatively. It has also improved opportunities for Wellspring to work in collaboration and partnership with national cancer organizations such as Pancreatic Cancer Canada and Bladder Cancer Canada to extend reach across the country and provide access to more specialized programming offerings.

## CHALLENGES

Yet, some challenges remain. Many patients, primarily those more elderly, have expressed unease with the use of online technology. Some areas of the country have limited internet access, and other members have fear of privacy concerns and worry about sharing sensitive information while at home with other family members present. Considerations of national time zones remain an ongoing issue, as has the fact that program leaders find that online programming is more tiring work and that the personal interaction with members is missed. Additionally, no matter how diligently one prepares for an online program, there are many elements beyond your control, such as poor internet connections, barking dogs, and participants inadvertently turning on their microphones during presentations. Patience and constant reminders to participants are needed.

So, Wellspring established “Zoom Buddies” to assist with technical questions, registration needs, Zoom access and privacy concerns. As well, national time zones have now become part of every program description, program hosts review a series of ‘housekeeping protocols’ with all participants before each program begins, and program leaders are now lingering on the online platforms after the conclusion of the program to enable members the opportunity to speak with one another or to ask personal questions.

## THE FUTURE

So, where does Wellspring go from here? Of course, Wellspring welcomes the days when the centres can once again reopen to patients, their family members and their caregivers. However, Well on the Web and online programming will continue as an integral part of the Wellspring brand available to cancer patients across Canada and beyond, and each new program developed will include considerations for online adaptation and facilitation.

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EMOTIONAL SUPPORT PROGRAMS	PHYSICAL/FUNCTIONAL/PRACTICAL SUPPORT PROGRAMS
Bereavement Support Group	Brain Fog
Breast Cancer Support Group	Cancer Related Fatigue
Cancer Transition Coach	Chi Life
Caregivers Connect: Support & Relaxation	Group Online Exercise
Children’s and Parents’ Program	Money Matters
Expressive Arts Workshops: Art, Writing, Meditation, Music	Returning to Work
Family Counselling (including Paeds & Parents Counselling)	Wellness at Work
Gay Men’s Cancer Support Group	Wellspring Yoga
Healing Journey, Levels 1-5	INFORMATIONAL SUPPORT PROGRAMS
Meditation Workshops and Ongoing Practice	Be Well Talk Series and Caregiver Talk Series
Oasis Advanced Cancer Support Group	Nourish Educational Series
Oasis Parents’ Support Group	Beans & Grains
Ovarian Cancer Support Group	Plant-Based Eating
Paeds & Parent’s Support Group	Myths & Controversies
Parent’s Support Group	Nutrition and Breast Cancer
Peer Support (including Pancreatic Cancer and Bladder Cancer Peer Support)	Super Healthy Strategies
Prostate Cancer Support Group	Talking with Dietitians
Relaxation & Visualization	