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The art of healing

Helping families cope with pediatric cancer

by Julie O'Connor

Coping with the diagnosis and treatment for cancer is one of the most difficult things a person or family may face. In children it is not only difficult, but also is a traumatic experience that can create negative behavioral and psychological reactions to treatments, and can even affect the long-term survival and quality of life of the child.

Through a creative research program funded by Wayne State University's President's Research Enhancement Program, a collaborative team of faculty from the Karmanos Cancer Institute, the School of Medicine's department of family medicine and public health sciences, and the departments of theatre and art in the College of Fine, Performing and Communication Arts are designing new ways to use creative expression to reduce anxiety of children and their parents during distressing cancer treatments.

While waiting for a procedure, families participating in the study will be assigned to one of two settings: waiting in the reception area with toys, video and TV access and an enhanced waiting period with an art making activity for the child and parent to work on together. Interactions of the parent and child during the project will be captured on video, and then analyzed to determine the impact of the project on reducing parent and child anxiety before a procedure.

"This family-centered care agenda is the vision of the top leaders at Children's Hospital of Michigan" said Terrance Albrecht, Ph.D., principal investigator and professor of family medicine and public health sciences at WSU's School of Medicine, associate center director for population sciences and program leader of population studies and prevention at KCI. "It is great leadership in the WSU Office of the Vice President of Research and at Children's Hospital of Michigan that has helped bring our extraordinary team together, and they are our true inspiration for this research project."

The funding will allow the research team to study the treatment, stress and trauma that not only the child experiences, but the entire family. "Kids can be strong and resilient, but we have found that the parents face great fear that can often lead to less than constructive responses," said Albrecht. "Through this program, we aim to help them orient through



treatment through creative expression

the treatment process together and channel their energy to create positive moments with their child that can help them through treatment.”

Albrecht doesn't know what the long-term effect will be, but this small pilot will allow them to see if there are differences in anxiety levels by comparing the research participants to the control group. “If it makes even a small dent, that's good,” said Albrecht. “We can then think of longer-term interventions that include creative elements, and help families cope in a positive way through creative distractions.”

An intensive qualitative analysis also will be conducted by Dr. Steven Peters, co-principal investigator and associate dean of academic affairs and research, and professor of theatre in the College of Fine, Performing and Communication Arts. Verbal and non-verbal behavioral data will be re-contextualized as performances, and then analyzed as four kinds of survival energy: the mover, or one who initiates a plan of action; the opposer, or one who challenges the mover's actions; the follower, or one who supports the mover or the opposer; and the bystander, or one who withdraws from interaction to observe from afar or leaves the room. By viewing the interaction between the parent and child with and without the art project, an assessment of parent social support can be made, and how anxiety and tension between them is heightened or lessened.

“The field of performance studies provides an analytical lens through which we can decode the interactions (performances) between the parent and the child during the art intervention that

occurs at the time of treatment. Social interactions reflect the type of context or story that parents have chosen as a compass for survival during the health crisis. Their story frames a likely pattern of events they expect will unfold. Each parent casts themselves and their child (and everyone else they encounter during treatment) in that story,” said Peters. “Some stories have happy endings with themes of validation or support. Others are stories of loss and victimization. Still other stories center on blame or abandonment. The question for me is whether or not the story that the parent chooses has a bearing upon the outcome of treatment.

This project will give Fine, Performing and Communication Arts students valuable insights on the role that their own and other people's stories actually play in the creating and shaping of their lives. Art, dance, drama and music will play a significant complementary role in 21st century medicine because of their survival value, and will be profoundly normalizing and supportive for those undergoing medical treatment. Creative expression in a medical setting can ultimately rebuild a child and their family's sense of hope, identity and coping through safe expression of feelings.

“Essentially, we grow up, we dream and we live our entire lives through stories,” said Peters. “Stories are mother lodes of energy that charge us with power, contextualize the images of what we want to happen and that happen to us, determine the construction of our identities in relationships, and become the essential imaginative vehicles of our survival.”



About Dr. Steven Peters:

Dr. Peters received a graduate degree in theatre arts from Baylor University and a Ph.D. from Texas Tech University. He joined Wayne State University in 2008.



About Dr. Terrance Albrecht:

Dr. Albrecht received a B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. in communications, and a Master's degree in Labor and Industrial Relations from Michigan State University. She joined Wayne State University in 2003.

To learn more, visit: <http://www.med.wayne.edu/fam/faculty/albrecht.asp> and <http://www.cfpc.wayne.edu/>

