

# Stretching the Medical Model Toward Holistic Healthcare on a Zero Budget

by Diane Stredny, BS, RN, HTCP, CCA-Healing Touch Program Coordinator and Sharon Wheeler, MS, MT-BC, LCAT, HTCP-Healing Arts Manager

“Sure you can do it as long as it doesn’t cost anything!” said complementary medicine proponent Mary Ellen Plass, Chief Nursing Officer of Albany Medical Center. Albany Med is a 600-bed hospital/regional trauma center and medical school in Albany, New York. Approximately four years ago we began a process of innovative collaboration which has slowly transformed a traditional medical model into a patient-centered holistic approach to patient care by identifying the patient’s need for comfort and acknowledging the body, mind, spirit connection.

“How does one do this on a zero budget?” you ask. The Healing Arts Department was the brainchild of a short-lived integrative health committee. Inspired therapist Sharon Wheeler and nurse Diane Stredny set out with determination, intentionality and a ‘thinking outside the box’ approach to support a healing environment. The hospital supported our efforts by providing Healing Touch (HT) classes free for employees and volunteers through an education fund, thus creating a pool of practitioners to provide HT to our patients.

Initially, Wheeler obtained artwork which was donated for patient rooms while organizing employees to display their own work. Wellness lectures and concerts began to roll out. Later, we designed an Employee Tranquility Room using a special fund available through the oncology department, while the psychiatry department built a similar room. Relaxation music was played on patient TV’s and we obtained permission to show



‘Introduction to Healing Touch’ on our educational channel. Visionary nurse managers supported positional flexibility to allow Stredny, an RN in dialysis, to be on-call nights so she could perform Healing Touch with patients and staff during evening hours. Wheeler expanded her role as diversional therapist by simply offering Healing Touch as another bedside modality which aligned with the Healing Arts concept of creating a healing environment.

In our early days, we operated under the auspices of the pastoral care department. Our ability to accept referrals from hospital staff was enhanced by the pastoral care staff sharing their administrative assistant and phone services. The oncology department shared space in its library so we could have an employee HT clinic. An old exam table was procured from storage and linens for the table were borrowed from units. Volunteers provided a used stereo and CD’s for use in the HT clinic and for patient usage.

With support from directors and nurse managers job descriptions were creatively rewritten so we could modify our jobs to include more healing work. After establishing credibility with the Healing Touch intervention, Wheeler became the healing arts manager and Stredny became the HT coordinator. Wheeler drummed up business with day shift staff and Stredny did the same with the evening and night staffs.

Initially employees were aware of our complementary offerings only by word of mouth. Aided by our education department, we quickly developed a pamphlet for staff and patients. Furthering our visibility and “caring for the caregiver” mission, we offered a monthly “Unit Wellness Day” of HT sessions for the nursing units on all shifts, augmenting our staff of two with dedicated HT volunteers and colleagues. These special days enabled staff to experience this new modality, thus becoming advocates for their patients.

Now during new RN and nursing assistant orientation we include a focus on healing arts and diversional activities for patients. ‘Care for the caregiver’ is embraced by administration in the context of a synergistic model of health care. A multitude of stress management opportunities were created for employees such as wellness lectures and concerts, mindfulness meditation, two tranquility rooms, a healing touch clinic, yoga classes, and workout rooms.

Early on, we would receive calls from patients saying, “Don’t you have anything like Reiki? They offer it at other hospitals!” As our program has grown, the community response is now, “My friend told me they had Healing Touch at Albany Med. How can I get it?” “Can you really go into the operating room with me?” Our patient responses are quite profound. Other comments have included “You know, you’re better than Tylenol.” “Can you send my sleep therapist (Healing Touch)?” “I was expected to go to ICU after my operation and be in the hospital for at least five days. I did neither.” Not only have we received accolades from our patients and staff, we have received grateful patient monetary donations. As a result, we developed a form letter to allow any patient to make a donation through the Albany Med Foundation to benefit our program.

Requests for our services have increased as have our community volunteers. We have operated for several years with a handful of dedicated HT volunteers, who moved through the levels of HT from level 1 to certification. They gain valuable experience and we gain a strong, steady presence within the program. Utilizing practice groups and a mentored approach, we allow our lay volunteers (level 1 HT, TT and Reiki) to feel comfortable and safe in a hospital setting. Staff now recognize our HT volunteers and often make ‘on the spot’ referrals. Often, doctors refrain from interrupting our sessions. Additionally, we

have a presence on protocols for pain management, eating disorders and alternatives to restraints.

In an average month, we see 100 patients and 45 employees for HT and we receive two requests a month to accompany patients in the operating room. One thousand employees use the relaxation/tranquility rooms monthly. We have two full-time Healing Touch Certified Practitioners, a chaplain who is an HT apprentice and a cadre of community and staff volunteers. We continue to educate by participating in seminars and educational fairs. We now offer an energy primer for parents of NICU babies.

The Healing Arts Department continues to expand our services through outside grant monies, offering pediatric music therapy, massage therapy, aromatherapy, TFT and re-exology in addition to Reiki, Therapeutic Touch and Healing Touch. In addition, we are collecting data to lend further credibility to the growing body of research in Healing Touch. Our patients, families and staff tell us we make a difference!

About the authors:

Sharon: As Healing Arts Program Manager, Sharon has developed and implemented a healing environment for patients, visitors, and employees via “The Arts.” By adding relaxation music to patient TV’s, creating an art borrowing cart, providing diversional activities, music therapy and healing touch to her patients, she has created a more personalized touch to patient care. Her efforts go beyond treating patients. She also serves the Medical Center and its employees by instituting ‘Muzak’ in the lobbies and various units, displaying artwork by employees, and coordinating “Wellness Wednesdays,” which are lectures and musical offerings and helped create employee tranquility rooms. Sharon has a Master’s degree in Health Education, a B.S. and board certification in music therapy, licensure in creative arts therapy and is a certified Healing Touch practitioner.

Diane: As Healing Touch Program Coordinator, Diane provides Healing Touch for an employee clinic as well as inpatient bedside treatments. She mentors employees in Healing Touch and provides training and practice groups. In addition, she coordinates volunteers who administer Healing Touch to inpatients at the bedside. Diane formerly worked as a dialysis nurse, while completing her certifications in Healing Touch clinical aromatherapy. She is also a Reiki Master.