

# Gathering emphasizes ways to avoid and combat cancer

**Frances Stebbins**

With the many varieties of cancer the second leading cause of death among Americans, clergy and church staff members working in pastoral care are bound to encounter many families touched by the disease. In addition, their own lives are affected when loved ones are diagnosed with cancer and they are faced with at best a long and expensive illness for which full recovery is still often uncertain.

And one of the few things a grieving family can do is to try to educate others in prevention of the disease and point out community resources that may make the trial easier. For in urban areas like the Roanoke Valley a lot of help is available if patients and their families know about and use it.

With this background, The Jefferson College of Health Sciences and the local unit of the American Cancer Society recently cooperated in sponsoring a free three-hour workshop especially for staff members of faith groups and any others interested. It's believed to be the first such event and may be followed by others as the Carilion medical corporation seeks to strengthen ties with the faith communities so important in our area.

The program attracted about 20 pastors, chaplains and parish nurses to a large facility on Apperson Drive where health sciences students were present. The cancer society's staff work from an office in the Colonnade Center on Virginia 419.

Presiding were the Rev. Dr. N.L. Bishop, the chief operating officer of The College of Health Sciences based on South Jefferson Street. Bishop is a man of many

skills; his several degrees have taken him to criminal justice and the United Methodist ministry of a Christiansburg congregation, to a retirement home director as well as an administrator in higher education.

He's also the son of parents who both died of cancer relatively early in life.

Bishop was joined by Debbie Brown, a staff member of Greene Memorial United Methodist Church in downtown Roanoke --as well as formerly with First United Methodist in Salem. She too lost her parents to cancer and was their caregiver, learning then about the resources the cancer society has to offer. She's been active in the big Relay for Life walks in summer and teaches cancer prevention wherever she can.

"Over half of cancer cases could have been prevented," Brown told the group. Increasingly people are learning about the effects of smoking, excessive drinking and poor diets --as well as some emotional storms not expected -- which make people more prone to develop the disease. Heredity is also a big factor with some cancers; knowing one's family history may help here.

Next the group heard from Suzanne E.Seth, a registered nurse who has specialized in cancer patients for much of her professional life, and strongly supports palliative care through hospices when the disease appears terminal. She too has lost both parents as well as a sister to different forms of cancer, which, she pointed out, is not one disease but many.

Cancer is basically cells of the body that grow out of control and

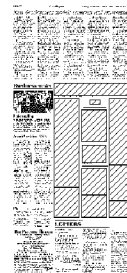
rob the normal tissues of what they need to survive, she explained. Major organs as well as the blood and other body fluids can all be affected. Without treatment people with cancer will die over varying periods of time.

No one knows the cause the cells go awry, Seth pointed out. Environment, such as direct and indirect exposure to tobacco or certain chemicals, clearly hurts some people though others aren't affected. Some cancers do run in families and may be prevented by early testing. A minister revealed that his teenage granddaughter has been found to be at risk for colon cancer; she'll get checked earlier and more often.

Treatment, said Seth, is still surgery, radiation and all sorts of chemotherapy which saves many who formerly faced certain death from the blood cancers. The nurse described improved management of the unpleasant side-effects the drastic treatment may cause.

This where the American Cancer Society can be especially useful with its advice, equipment for special needs, even some financial help, staff members Dr. Phyllis Whitehead, Rebecca Sweeney and Kristen Lukas pointed out.

The pain cancer can cause is one of the things that makes the diagnosis so terrifying to a new patient, Seth and Whitehead pointed out. Speaking as a hospice supporter in its management she asserted that fear of becoming addicted to powerful drugs keeps many patients and their families from using enough medicine to keep a dying person comfortable and able to carry on some activities that make everyone feel better.



Pain management nurses, such as those who work with hospices, know how much medicine to give and can increase it as needed, the ACS staff members said.

Speaking especially to those in the audience who are faced with theological questions, Seth said she believes in honesty about the likelihood of recovery. "Cancer is not a death sentence," she pointed out, but when a patient asks her if he's going to die, it's often possible to say, "Not today." For those with a family of faith acceptance of the reality that "It's between you and God" may be what's needed.

It's especially important to keep children informed of probable losses

of parents or other close relatives, Seth advised. Even young children worry about illness in their families and the uncertainty they feel may cause long-lasting problems.

The American Cancer Society counselors can help. They can be reached at (toll free) 1-800-ACS2345.

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