

M.D. treats mind, body

Compassionate doctor helps ease anxieties of cancer patients

By LOIS LEGGE Features Writer

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Halifax radiation oncologist Dr. Rob Rutledge co-authored *The Healing Circle*, a book about the support groups that help ease the minds of those diagnosed with cancer. (Eric Wynne / Staff)

THE HOSPITAL waiting room is full of sombre faces.

Some have already heard the word most of us dread.

And their physical prognosis is as varied as the types of cancer invading their bodies.

But what's going through the minds of these men and women on this sunny mid-September morning inside Nova Scotia Cancer Centre?

And how are they coping with the diagnosis Halifax radiation oncologist Dr. Rob Rutledge says often "shatters" the body and the mind?

For the past 20 years, the 45-year-old physician and associate professor has delved as much into what cancer patients are thinking as how they're feeling.

He's a local pioneer of sorts in the whole mind-body connection that others are only beginning to see as a vital part of care.

He organized free support groups for cancer patients long before things like meditation and stress management inched their way into the mainstream.

And he's watched his early interest in providing emotional support blossom into a charitable initiative that's included free weekend retreats in 17 cities for more than 1,200 patients or their families.

He also recently co-authored — with his retreat co-leader, psychotherapist Tim Walker — a book called *The Healing Circle*, about the free support groups he says help ease the depression or anxiety affecting about one third of cancer patients.

Sitting inside his office, past that Nova Scotia Cancer Centre waiting room at Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre, medicine and the mind collide.

Words like "brain tumour" and "diagnosis" stand out in red on his office white board. And books about spiritual healing rest on his desk — his own book and another called *Prayers and Healing*:

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365 Blessings, Poems and Meditations from Around the World, given to him for personal reasons we'll get to later.

"We go into the darkness," he says of the weekend "healing circles," which often include as many as 50 patients, who share their stories and their fears as the days unfold.

And by the end of these weekends "something has been unburdened" — often common fears about death and pain.

"Obviously, it's different in different situations but really some diagnoses are quite life-threatening and pull that person right out of their previous life and suddenly they're in this world alone . . .," says the married father of two, who is also an associate professor of medicine at

Dalhousie University.

So it helps to "just simply tell their story, talk about their fears — their fears of recurrence, their fears of dying, having to tell family members, having to tell their kids, or their parents.

"You know these are the universal issues that people with cancer face and in that circle when they're telling their story and listening, suddenly they don't feel so isolated.

"You'd have somebody with a very, very early breast cancer, just diagnosed, 99 plus chance of cure, sitting . . . beside somebody who's obviously within a few months of the end of their life, wouldn't you think it would scare the socks off of that early (patient)?

"What happens is you find out the person near the end of their life is very much alive, they're expressing themselves, they're full of wisdom and joy and it demystifies the dying process; it takes the fear out of it because we in this society, we don't talk about death and dying."

Rutledge started thinking and talking about these things while still studying medicine at the University of Toronto even though it wasn't a big part of the curriculum.

He stumbled upon a book called *Love, Medicine and Miracles* by Bernie Siegel, a cancer surgeon and support group pioneer, who has now written a testimonial for *The Healing Circle*.

Discovering that book was one of those "magic moments in life," says Rutledge, and it set him on a path that has become his passion.

He loves his day job, providing radiation treatment that could possibly heal some cancer patients — adults and children.

But he says the support groups, which also teach patients meditation and other stress-relieving skills, bring care to a higher level.

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These days, the skills he helps teach in those groups and the skills he helps outline in his own book are coming in handy.

So are the words in *Prayers and Healing: 365 Blessings, Poems and Meditations from Around the World*. A friend and pediatric palliative care doctor gave it to Rutledge when she discovered his own mother was dying of cancer — a brain tumour that has progressed to the point where the oncologist says: "I know what the end of this movie is going to be."

He's flying to Vancouver Island to see her on the day after this interview. And he's feeling all the emotions he's witnessed in all those family members of all those patients over the years.

So he's trying to "embrace the sadness" and feel the feelings and let himself cry, all the things he and Walker have encouraged cancer patients and their families to do.

"It's very sad you know," Rutledge says. "There's the grief that goes along with that. And . . . I know 79-year-old women develop cancers and they can die from cancers and so on but it doesn't take the grief away from it.

"I do consider myself a compassionate physician but it also really kind of sensitizes me to the emotions of the family members and how really raw people are feeling and how kindness (from) the physicians or nurses can make just a huge difference."

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For more information go to www.HealingandCancer.org.