



Leadership – Nova Scotia Style

While we might think of a ‘leader’ as the person ‘out front’ conducting and directing others, often a leader is the person ‘behind the scenes’, the ardent motivator who quietly maintains the operations and empowers others to do their best. Radiation Oncologist, Dr. Rob Rutledge passionately embraces this concept of leadership and views it as a group effort.

“I’m really uncomfortable with the term ‘leader,” said Dr. Rutledge, who practices within Capital Health and is an Associate Professor with Dalhousie University’s Faculty of Medicine. “I think of myself more as a catalyst and facilitator. I don’t separate myself from the people I work with or from the patients and families I serve; we are all in this together.”

In fact, Dr. Rutledge says there are many layers of ‘leaders’ in the process of providing supportive care. From the medical team of nurses and physicians to the psychologists/social specialists, community-based organizations, and patients and families, supportive care is multi-dimensional.

That said, aside from being a renowned physician, lecturer and presenter, Dr. Rutledge sees his role as helping to raise awareness for what others are doing for supportive care. This includes everything from providing information about diagnosis and treatments, to promoting healthy living and helping people delve into their fears and problems. In recognition of his contribution to physician health and health promotion in oncology patients, Dr. Rutledge was recently presented with the Doctors’ Nova Scotia award for Health Promotion. He continues to use his passion and enthusiasm to teach patients, families and health professionals how to empower and advocate for themselves.

In 1999, he and Dr. Tim Walker – a psychotherapist and spiritual teacher – along with social worker Susan Kenny, developed the *Skills for Healing Weekend Retreats*. Held throughout Canada, these sessions provide cancer patients and families with an opportunity to talk with supportive care specialists and learn mindfulness-based stress reduction strategies (e.g. meditation) to help them deal with their cancer more effectively. To date, Drs. Rutledge and Walker have run 19 sessions in 13 cities, reaching out to more than 600 people. The response has been great with many benefits, not the least of

which is their ability to connect people with each other.

“A recent study, *The impact of psychological interventions on medical cost offset: A meta-analytic review**, showed that supportive care not only increases a patient’s quality of life, but saves money,” said Dr. Rutledge. “It found that families use fewer services when they receive early supportive intervention.”

While providing timely supportive care to patients is critical, Dr. Rutledge said that it is equally important to have supports for health professionals, considering that more than 50 percent of all physicians are in advance stages of burn-out.

“Offering compassion and a means for self-care to health professionals is huge,” says Dr. Rutledge. “Moreover, finding a balance in our own healing process as professional caregivers, helps to sensitize us to what our patients/families are experiencing. There is an obvious overlap between our self-care and how we care for others. We realize that our behaviour influences outcomes.”

Dr. Rutledge believes that life is a journey and currently, his path is leading him to create a not-for-profit organization called *Healing and Cancer* to help promote the role of supportive care.

“Supportive care happens every day. It’s that human connection between people,” said Dr. Rutledge. “I’m learning so much about myself through the people I meet at the retreats. They’ve taught me that life is short and precious and I want to incorporate this wisdom into all aspects of my life.”

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Chiles et al.

Dr. Rob Rutledge

