

Another Kind of Chicago Hope

DC NAMED MEDICAL DIRECTOR OF AIDS ALTERNATIVE HEALTH PROJECT

Editorial Staff

Dion Richetti, DC, medical director of AAHP: "It's really complementary to traditional medicine, especially for patients experiencing side effects of combination drug therapy treatments."

Dion Richetti, DC, of Oak Park, Illinois, has been appointed medical director of the Chicago-based AIDS Alternative Health Project (AAHP). Dr. Richetti, who also is AAHP's associate director, will supervise all the agency's therapeutical services and personnel, including the on-site services provided by MDs at the AIDS Care Unit in St. Joseph's Hospital, where the AAHP has a new chiropractic/physiotherapy unit.

The AAHP was founded in 1986 by a small group of chiropractors, acupuncturists, and massage therapists who were deeply committed to helping AIDS patients. Today, the AAHP has evolved to become the largest complementary health care clinic for persons with HIV and AIDS in the Midwest, and one of the largest clinics of its kind in the country.

Operating with a volunteer staff of 75, including chiropractors, psychologists, acupuncturists, and massage therapists, AAHP has provided care to HIV and AIDS patients in the Chicago area for the past decade. Since the program's inception, more than 2,500 people have received services at AAHP clinics. In 1995 alone, more than 12,000 client treatments were performed at AAHP's sites; that number has since risen to more than 15,000 treatments per year.

"Treating the HIV/AIDS patient has moved from treating terminally ill patients to treating chronically ill patients," says Michael Brickman, AAHP's executive director. He believes this warrants a complementary therapy approach. "When you consider the fact that narcotic pain killers can cost from \$40 to \$100 each month, and when you add the cost of physician appointments and take side effects into account, the benefits of exploring these therapies becomes obvious."

To further explore alternative methods of pain management, AAHP has aligning with Catholic Health Partners (CHP), which includes St. Joseph Hospital and Columbus Hospital, both progressive leaders in HIV/AIDS primary care.

St. Joseph Hospital initially approached AAHP after hearing reports of AIDS patients experiencing significant pain and symptom relief from the complementary therapies of AAHP. In January 1996, a collaborative agreement was reached to bridge the gap between medical care and complementary therapy for St. Joseph HIV/AIDS patients.

Under supervision of Dion Richetti, DC, MDs from St. Joseph Hospital maintain regular hours in the AAHP medical suite, which includes the new chiropractic/physiotherapy unit. The AAHP provides chiropractic, physiotherapy, acupuncture, massage, nutritional advice, and mental health therapy. All AAHP practitioners are credentialed hospital care-givers. The hospital's MDs provide the counterpoint:

the traditional medical treatments. "It's really complementary to traditional medicine, said Dr. Richetti, "especially for patients experiencing side effects of combination drug therapy treatments."

As the population of AIDS patients has grown and become more diverse, AAHP has continued to maintain an open-door policy towards all people with AIDS, including the homeless. Over the last two years, AAHP has expanded its services to include three sites. In addition to its main clinic in the Uptown area (St. Joseph Hospital), AAHP also operates clinics at Cook County Hospital, and at the Rafael Center. Services are provided by AAHP on a sliding-fee scale, depending on the patient's income; some pay no fees.

On tap for the AAHP is the opening of a complementary care clinic in the new \$25 million Cook County Hospital and Rush Health Center AIDS Outpatient Center when the facility is completed in 1998.

AAHP services are intended to help patients deal with symptoms of HIV infection, ease the side-effects of drug therapies, and lessen the pain and stress often associated with infections. The AAHP's methods are having a positive effect on their patients' well-being. In their most recent survey, AAHP found that 90 percent of their clients reported "a significant difference in their quality of life," while 89 percent of clients felt that AAHP was important in overall treatment related to HIV.

Perhaps the words of one recent patient known only as JoAnne C. put it best: "When I came to AAHP, I was ashamed and alone. I didn't feel worthy. But the staff said to try this therapy, and to try that therapy, and everybody was so supportive. So I tried this and I tried that, and it worked. I felt better. I could eat again. I know that I wouldn't still be here without AAHP."

By combining traditional primary medical care with alternative therapies, the AAHP is providing HIV/AIDS patients with the best of all possible worlds in a less than perfect world.

Editor's note: The AIDS Alternative Health Project can be reached at: (773) 561-2800.

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