On the couch

Leading the way

Dr Peter Mackereth is Clinical Lead for Complementary Therapies at Christie Hospital, Manchester, and lectures at Salford University

Q When did you start work at Christie Hospital?
In 2001. My role was to develop a team of therapists and to look at ways to generate income to support a hospital CT service. At the time there were only two part-time therapists. Now we have 33 therapists, 17 of whom are paid, and in the past 12 months we raised £110,000 to fund the service.

Q What’s your CT of choice?
It’s a constant journey of discovery. The more you work with a therapy, the more you learn about what it offers. I find that reflexology combined with guided imagery works well at helping patients deal with treatment-related anxiety. As part of a smoking cessation project I’m working on, acupuncture is producing some very interesting results. Massage, and especially chair massage, is very helpful for people who have treatment-related anxiety, such as needle phobia or anticipatory nausea, which particularly affects those having chemotherapy. Most of our therapists work in the wards, giving treatments to patients and their carers. In the past four years, we have provided 14,000 treatments to patients, 3,000 treatments to carers, and 4,500 treatments to staff. Patients and carers are not charged but staff pay £5 for a half-hour session.

Q Is the medical profession ever be fully integrated into the medical system?
We get referrals all the time at Christie’s, so I feel we are already fully integrated. Funding is always going to be an issue because the NHS is constantly struggling for cash. Through research, evidence is beginning to build and this all helps with integration and raising the profile of CTs.

Q How do you cope with the emotional pressures of working with people who have cancer?
It is a real challenge but at Christie’s we pride ourselves on having a very good support system. Education is important as therapists need to know exactly what cancer is and the treatments involved, but we also offer supervision to all our therapists. I have supervision myself once a month with a psychotherapist.

Q Do you think therapies will ever be fully integrated into the medical system?
Be persistent. And don’t go it alone – get a group of volunteer therapists and fundraisers on board. Arm yourself with relevant research and be careful of the language you use; words like ‘healing’ and ‘channelling energy’ turn off a lot of people in the medical profession. If there is one thing I think therapists can help with, it’s anxiety – and anxiety affects pain perception, sleep, food intake, depression and treatment compliance.

Q Do you have a favourite quote?
One of my therapists said: ‘Let’s become indispensable’.

Dr Peter Mackereth is Clinical Lead for Complementary Therapies at Christie Hospital, and a part-time lecturer at Salford University. He is the co-author of two books (Clinical Reflexology and Massage and Bodywork: Adapting Therapies for Cancer Care) and has had more than 40 papers published in complementary therapy, nursing and medical journals.