

## Let's talk about sex: Nurse helps couples heal



*Traci Owen, RN, BSN helps couples survive cancer together.*

by Mike Lee  
Staff Writer

Traci Owen, RN, BSN has the title of survivorship manager at Tulsa's Cancer Treatment Centers. She's also the sexual awareness nurse or just the sex nurse for short.

But whatever she's called, hundreds of couples have found out she's been the savior of their relationships during a cancer diagnosis.

"What I noticed was at the beginning of a cancer diagnosis both partners are all in," Owen said. "As cancer has become a disease of chronicity with people living longer with cancer and many ongoing treatments you see those couples silo off from each other at about 10 to 14 months."

Owen says couples often band together with the initial diagnosis.

Then roles change from husband and wife to caregiver and patient.

The tests, the nauseating chemo and other treatments begin to take their toll.

There's fatigue, loss of sex drive and, often times, ability to function.

Partners may be living with cancer but the disease's first real victim is intimacy.

"There is very little that we do that doesn't have some sort of effect on sexuality," Owen said.

A 2009 study published in the journal *Cancer* found that a married woman diagnosed with a serious disease is six times more likely to be divorced or separated than a man with a similar diagnosis.

Among study participants, the divorce rate was 21 percent for seriously ill women and three percent for seriously ill men.

A control group divorced at a rate of 12 percent, suggesting that if disease makes husbands more likely to split, it makes wives more likely to stay.

That's why Owen begged her administrators a few years ago to make her position permanent.

"Patients are waiting for healthcare providers to bring up those side effects and the healthcare providers are sitting back and waiting for the patient to bring it up," Owen said. "I've been amazed at how many healthcare providers are not comfortable discussing sexuality."

"Several patients told me they brought it up and they felt shut down so they've never brought it up

again."

Away from the hospital, Owen and husband, Michael, serve as the marriage counseling team at Asbury United Methodist in Tulsa.

The duo, who lead an eight-session premarital counseling course, are sometimes seen as an obstacle. "Usually they dread us," Owen said. "They come in thinking they are going to be judged for whatever."

But at CTCA, people are beating a path to her door.

"Usually if someone doesn't cry on our first visit I figure I haven't dug deep enough," Owen said.

"This is so emotional and it's such a connection issue. When that partnership begins to struggle the patient becomes weaker. So if we can keep that marriage strong and that relationship connected to each other the patient always fairs better."

A CNA since 17, Owen has 31 years in health care.

"I have no other skills," she laughs.

The 1989 Central State University grad has loved every season of her nursing career.

"I was that kid at three telling everyone I was a nurse," she said. "I feel like I was put here and that was my role to be a nurse. I can't imagine doing anything different with my life that would be any more fulfilling. For me, nursing is a passion and I love that I'm 26 years down the road and I still have such a passion for being a nurse."

Owen cut her nursing teeth at St. Francis in Tulsa in 1990, where she had the dubious distinction of being the first new grad ever hired at the trauma center.

"A lot of the staff was really mad the director had brought in this young chick with no experience," Owen said. "Those nurses were so hard on me but they formed me into a really strong nurse. I loved trauma medicine."

Since 1988, Cancer Treatment Centers of America (CTCA) has been helping patients win the fight against cancer using advanced technology and a personalized approach.

Four of the CTCA hospitals have maintained the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' coveted Five-Star Quality Summary Rating based on patient experience, a reflection of the Patient Empowered Care model and Mother Standard at the heart of operations.

At the Tulsa center, Owen helps both couples and providers unpack their sexual baggage.

"Nurses, doctors – all of your healthcare team are trained in the anatomy," she said. "We know all the correct names. We know the location, physiology and function and disease. But when we start talking about the issue of sexuality that brings in a whole psychological realm and we're not prepared for that in training."

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