Jin Shin Jyutsu as part of an integrative medical plan

By Beverly Bell

For information about JSJ, visit ukhealthcare.uky.edu/markey/JSJ/
The patients enter Jennifer Bradley’s treatment room at the UK Markey Cancer Center in widely different states of emotion — worried, angry, exhausted, scared, and yes, skeptical. After all, what can she give them with her Japanese touch therapy that traditional cancer treatments can’t already address?

Turns out, more than anyone could have realized.

Bradley practices Jin Shin Jyutsu (JSJ), an ancient art form of touching key points on the body in order to increase energy flow and return the natural harmony within. Five years ago, Bradley offered it at no charge to cancer patients at the center as a way to give back to the facility, which had provided care to her late mother-in-law. Now, through a grant from the Lexington Cancer Foundation, patients can receive up to five free sessions from Bradley. Jin Shin Jyutsu has become part of an integrated medical plan, one that includes chemotherapy, radiation, surgery, and yes, this Eastern-based approach that can help to reduce the pain, stress and nausea many patients face as a result of their illness.

Back in 2009, when Bradley began volunteering at the center’s chemotherapy clinic, she had to seek out patients. She conducted short, 20-minute sessions, mainly as a relaxation tool. As patients started reporting back to their doctors about feeling better, Bradley received a call from the office of Dr. Mark Evers, the director of the Markey Cancer Center. He wanted to meet with her and better understand what she was doing. After that conversation, he talked with some of the patients and their doctors.

“I was amazed at what I was hearing,” he says. JSJ was providing relief, in some cases as a complement to traditional medicine and in others, where conventional treatments had come up short.

That resulted in the Markey Cancer Center receiving the first grant from the Lexington Cancer Foundation in 2011 for JSJ and a formal referral system was developed. The ongoing support from the Lexington Cancer Foundation allowed Bradley to take care of 160 patients last year.

Developed in Japan, JSJ traces its roots to thousands of years ago. Jiro Murai, a young philosopher from a medical family, rediscovered the art form in the early 1900s. One of his students, Mary Burmeister, brought it to the United States 50 years later.

During a session, patients lay fully clothed — with the exception of their shoes — on a padded massage table. Other than the soothing, spa-like music playing in the background, the sessions are quiet. This isn’t a communicative therapy, Bradley says. It’s more about giving people a calm place to put their restless minds.

Treatments — radiation, chemo and other medicines — can wreak havoc on patients. They often feel overwhelmed and conflicted about their own bodies, which simultaneously hold both the illness and the possibility of remission. Bradley understands this. “The body is doing the best it can to keep you on this planet,” she says.

Adding to the complexity of experiencing cancer, some patients undergo post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, similar to those found in soldiers returning from war. “It’s that moment of diagnosis for some,” says Bradley. “The moment you found the lump. For others it may be the difficult treatments or reoccurrence that is a trigger.” People can walk around like that for months, even years. Their bodies remain in a constant flight/fight condition, and that makes them unable to be a full partner in their healing.

“They don’t understand what the doctors are telling them. They can’t eat. They can’t sleep. The thinking mind shuts down,” Bradley says, noting that the National Cancer Institute recognizes PTSD as a serious effect of cancer diagnosis and treatment that needs to be addressed.

“It’s up to her to try to address this disharmony. She uses both hands and gently touches some of the 52 energy pathways, 26 on each side of the body. In the medical world, these might be called trigger points. Bradley refers to them as “little spheres of energy.”

Through the thousands of nerve endings in her fingertips, Bradley “listens” to the pulses. They tell her where areas are blocked. She compares it to stones in a stream, preventing the water’s natural current. “We take those stones out and now the stream is back on its normal path,” she says. The areas she touches and the order in which she does it, called flows in JSJ, is determined by what her fingers “hear” and what Bradley picks up from observing and talking with the patient. The concerted process leads to a more relaxed pulsation and a restored balance.

Mary Gay Lake is one of those patients who has benefited from JSJ. “When you’re taking chemotherapy, you are given a steroid,” she says. “This … opened up a world of anxiety, sleeplessness, feeling very hyped up. JSJ was very instrumental in keeping me calm and centered, focused.” Lake isn’t alone. Prior to each session, Bradley’s patients fill out a form, reporting levels of nausea, pain and stress on a scale to 10, with zero representing no symptoms. They complete the same paperwork afterward. In every case, all levels improved after the treatment.

While her work at the center is with cancer patients, Bradley also has a private practice and can use the technique on anyone of any age — head trauma victims, the elderly, those in hospice care, etc. When she can, Bradley enjoys volunteering to work with the addicted babies at the UK Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. Born into the world as users of various narcotics because of their mother’s substance abuse, these small babies represent some of the most compelling patients. They can’t make eye contact. They can’t tolerate touch.

Every motion and sound over-stimulates them. They cry constantly.

Bradley wanted to help. She showed one of the doctors three particular ways to hold the babies, she says. The physician found the most miserable infant in the unit and gave it a try. After about a minute, the little boy relaxed, stopped crying, turned his head, looked up at the doctor and smiled. “If you can work with someone in the beginning of their life, imagine how everything’s going to be different,” Bradley says.

The California native and licensed JSJ practitioner now teaches self-help classes and is developing online videos so that a greater number of people can access the therapy. Evers joins Bradley in wanting to reach a larger audience. “I’ve seen the great benefits that it’s had on our patients, and it’s truly remarkable,” he says. With additional funding, his hope is that they can expand the program, by making Bradley full-time and adding other professionals so that more patients can participate in sessions. “I’m really sold,” Evers says.