

UC Irvine studies therapy robot's effect on chemo patients

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Therapy robot Paro recently accompanied cancer patient Kirsten Osgood, 70, through a 7½-hour chemotherapy session at UC Irvine Medical Center. Image: Steve Zylus / University Communications

(Medical Xpress) -- Oncologists at UC Irvine Medical Center are pairing robotic baby harp seals with women receiving chemotherapy to study whether the cuddly mechanical creatures can ease pain and stress.

“Quality of life is a very important predictor of survival in ovarian cancer,” said Dr. Krishnansu Tewari, a gynecologic oncologist at UC Irvine and the study’s primary investigator. “The theory is that patients who have a good quality of life have a stronger immune system, and a stronger immune system lets you fight the cancer better.”

Researchers plan to enroll 100 women during the yearlong study. Some

will read, rest, play video games or watch TV during chemotherapy treatments, while others will be selected to interact with one of four robots donated by the manufacturer. Research coordinator Anita Wallick will survey both groups' anxiety, mood and pain levels for comparison.

According to gynecologic oncology fellow Dr. Ramez Eskander, the goal is to find new ways to improve what the National Cancer Institute calls complementary therapies – those that enhance or support conventional clinical treatment.

Kirsten Osgood is sold. The first patient enrolled in the trial, she recently underwent a grueling 7½-hour chemotherapy session that included a blood transfusion. “Paro” kept her company and, she said, reduced her anxiety.

“It’s very cute,” said Osgood, 70, who was diagnosed with Stage 3c ovarian cancer in September 2009. Since then, she has endured two lengthy operations to remove the tumor and nearby organs and lymph nodes and more than two dozen rounds of chemotherapy.

“It was really very comforting,” Osgood said of the [robot](#). “The chemo can sometimes be stressful, but the seal made the time fly.” She said Paro’s flippers flapped with excitement in response to her voice. At other times, the creature put its head down and made purring sounds.

The idea that animals can assist in emotional and physical healing has been around for decades. A well-known 1980 study suggested that people with coronary heart disease who owned pets lived longer than those without pets. A 1988 study found that a subject’s blood pressure was lowest when petting a dog. Another concluded that patients of a pain management clinic who were exposed to therapy dogs experienced less pain and showed improvements in mood and feelings of well-being.

But not everyone can tolerate a real, live animal – some people are allergic, Eskander noted.

“In a [chemotherapy](#) infusion center, we’re already dealing with individuals whose immune systems are compromised,” he said, adding that patients may also be wary of having an animal so close to the maze of tubes conveying the chemo drugs.

Provided by University of California, Irvine

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