

New study returns ancient practice to Dana-Farber

“Breathe in – one, two, three; breathe out – three, two, one.”

In a small circle in the middle of a Dana-Farber conference room, seven people sit with their hands on their rib cages, breathing deeply along with an instructor’s counts. Eyes closed, group members focus their energy on their lungs as they monitor each breath they take.

Then the six women and one man open their eyes. “The mind has to be a part of the process,” leader Ramel Ronés advises the group. “The mind and body have to act as one.”

Although it may not appear so at first glance, this gathering is a form of cancer treatment. And these are not just any students, they are patients participating in a pilot study

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that hopes to determine the benefits for metastatic breast cancer patients of the ancient Asian practice of “Qigong.”

Qigong (pronounced chi-gong), described by Ronés as the “core of Tai Chi,” combines extremely gentle movements and meditation to create an exercise connecting the mind and body. Last year, the approach – commonly used by cancer patients in China – was brought to the attention of DFCI medical oncologist Ursula Matulonis, MD, by Dana-Farber patient Cathy Kerr.

Kerr, also a researcher at Harvard Medical School’s Osher Institute and the Division for Research and Education in Complementary and Integrative Medical Therapies, has had the rare blood cancer multiple myeloma for eight years and credits Qigong with helping her heal and maintain a good quality of life. Ronés, Kerr’s Qigong teacher, designed and developed a “modified mind-body approach for cancer based on the Eastern arts,” building on his experience as a mind-body therapies consultant and martial artist.

Conducting their research through Dana-Farber’s Leonard P. Zakim Center for Integrated Therapies, investigators led by Matulonis hope their study – which started in June – will show what Qigong can do for Kerr and other patients. A larger randomized trial is expected to follow.

An alternative healing method

For the healthy person, exercise is a proven way to improve mood and lessen pain and fatigue. But for metastatic breast cancer patients, who often experience such symptoms, conventional exercise (such as walking or running) may not be possible. Because of this, the benefits of exercise on such patients have not yet been validated through research. According to the new protocol, however, Qigong’s use of slow-motion movements and visualization to stimulate the body is one way that investigators can find this out.

Qigong was previously examined at Dana-Farber in 2000 by Paul Richardson, MD, to learn if a program of exercise or relaxation could improve immune-system



Cathy Kerr practices Qigong under the watchful eye of Ramel Ronés. (Laura Wulf photos)



function in cancer patients. As part of the latest project, the participants attended Qigong sessions twice weekly from June through August. Researchers are now assessing mood, pain, fatigue, and quality-of-life through surveys completed by the patients. In addition, changes in their flexibility, strength, and diurnal cortisol levels (a hormone released in the body under stress) are being measured.

“We’re looking to determine if the women can sustain the 12-week program without dropping out so we can see if a larger study is possible,” explains Matulonis, director of Medical Gynecologic Oncology at DFCI.

Qigong is not the only study on Matulonis’ agenda. Having a longstanding interest in ovarian cancer patients, she has developed a project to examine patient decision making as it relates to treatment options, and is also involved in new ovarian cancer drug development. In addition, she is opening a tissue and clinical information bank to focus on this especially challenging disease.

“Women with recurring ovarian cancer have many different treatments to think about, and this Qigong study will look at age as a factor in deciding which therapy is best for them,” Matulonis says. This past May, the Patricia M. Cronin Foundation awarded her a \$5,000 grant to fund this new research.

“It’s very affirming to get a competitive award like this,” she adds. “We need more of this kind of support for ovarian cancer.” **AR**

