

March 1, 2008

## ***Paying for lodging adds to stress of cancer***

**Many treated in Houston have trouble paying for rooms, but one group has opened its doors for free**

By LYNN COOK

Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle

Cancer is tough enough and most patients battling the disease face monster medical bills, too. But a lesser-known financial hardship for out-of-towners who come to Houston for treatment at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center and other local hospitals is the price of lodging.

Chemotherapy, radiation treatments and even some surgery have increasingly become outpatient procedures. That saves insurance companies a bundle and has helped alleviate a chronic shortage of hospital beds, leaving them for the sickest patients with the most complicated cases.

But the 50,000 patients a year who travel here for extended treatment at M.D. Anderson are often left riding out their time in motels that — even with medical discounts — can cost thousands of dollars for a long-term stay. Some that are close enough to the Texas Medical Center and cheap enough to be practical offer rooms by the hour in addition to the medical discounts, and may draw unsavory guests.

“Patients come to us crying their hearts out, saying, ‘Please don’t send me back there. They broke into the room next door to me’ or ‘My car was stolen.’ But we don’t own these facilities, so we can’t control how they run their business,” said Lakshmi Naik, a clinical social work supervisor at M.D. Anderson.

The hotels’ cleanliness can be an issue, too.

“You have to remember, these are immuno-compromised patients,” Naik said. Until fairly recently, patients sick enough to travel for treatment often were hospitalized, so insurance companies picked up most of the tab for room and board. Today those costs tend to come directly out of patients’ pockets.

Mohit Ghose, a spokesman for America’s Health Insurance Plans, the D.C. trade group representing health insurers, said that depending on the plan, some cover housing costs outside the hospital.

"The best advice is to work with your plan to see what's available, because many encourage the use of centers of medical excellence to make sure the highest level of care is provided," he said.

Naik said the housing equation often becomes the biggest stress factor after the cancer diagnosis and treatment.

Beth Darnley, chief program officer with the Patient Advocate Foundation, which helps patients navigate the complexities of the American health care system, said that last year 70 percent of the organization's 44,700 patients reported a financial crisis resulting from their illness. That's up from just 24 percent in 2004. Problems ranged from huge out-of-town lodging bills to the loss of a job.

"It doesn't matter what your socioeconomic status is before you become ill," Darnley said. "Once you do, you will face a debt crisis issue if you're ill for a long period of time."

Naik agreed.

"It can contribute to depression, anxiety or a sense of feeling abandoned or lost," she said. "Many times patients are no longer employed. It can get pretty awful. We've found out there are patients staying in their cars for several nights because they don't qualify for assistance and they don't want to go to the Salvation Army."

### **Few charitable options**

A stay at M.D. Anderson's Rotary House, run by Marriott, costs a minimum of \$120 a night plus taxes. Cheaper hotels are dicey, insurance help is largely nonexistent, and charitable options are scarce.

M.D. Anderson has a pool of funds to subsidize some low-income Texas residents, but patients from other states or countries don't qualify. The Lifeline Chaplaincy organization offers a few nights of housing to new patients at no charge when it can, and a handful of churches and nonprofits, including Ronald McDonald House and Aishel House, help fill in the gap with housing for as little as \$20 a night.

### **Huge demand**

Those scarce slots are coveted because several hundred of-out-town

patients need lodging every night. One small outfit on the southern outskirts of the Medical Center, run entirely by volunteers, offers completely free long-term stays.

Hospitality Apartments, a gleaming new four-story 46-unit complex that recently replaced an older one, has been a godsend to people like Melissa and Michael Webb of Possum Grape, Ark. The couple came to Houston on Sept. 10 for what they thought would be a one-week stay.

"We really didn't know we'd be here that long," said Melissa Webb, who is caring for her husband while he's being treated for leiomyosarcoma at M.D. Anderson.

### **A dirty motel**

At first, the Webbs hunkered down in a \$45-a-night motel room they found close to the Medical Center. Although she'd heard stories about conditions at some such accommodations, she wasn't prepared for the reality.

"We had to clean the mouse droppings off the counters before we could move in," she said.

The Texas Department of State Health Services doesn't have enough hotel inspectors to worry about big cities, relying instead on city health departments, spokesman Doug McBride said.

But Houston doesn't have any hotel inspectors, said Kathy Barton, chief of public affairs for the city of Houston Health Department. Health inspectors only cover kitchens.

"Except for the initial fire inspection, there's really no regulatory authority over motels," she said.

### **On the waiting list**

After a few days, the Webbs moved to a better motel, but at \$50 a night the room was costing \$1,500 a month.

"Two months in a motel were eight months of house payments for us," she said. "Thank God friends of ours found this place on the Internet and put us on the waiting list without us knowing about it."

The Webbs got a spot at the Hospitality Apartments in November and plan to stay at least through the end of April while Michael finishes his eighth

round of chemotherapy. Ordinarily Hospitality provides free housing of up to three months, but the Webbs get to stay longer because Melissa is volunteering as a resident manager for the property.

Besides the guests from Arkansas, Hospitality is now home to patients from other states and countries including India and Venezuela.

"It's functional, not fancy, but it doesn't need to be. We're looking to give people a safe and sufficient place to stay while they're here," said Steve Sandifer, a minister at Southwest Central Church of Christ who serves as a trustee to Hospitality's board.

"In almost 40 years, with expansion, I figure we've given roughly 300,000 nights of shelter. If you estimate \$50 a night, that's about \$15 million we've saved people so far," he said.

### **Sense of community**

The Webbs say a sense of community develops among residents.

"In a motel, people look at you with that stare that says, 'They're sick. Something's wrong with them,' " Melissa said. "Here you can just walk up to people and ask, 'What kind do you have?' "

Hospitality Apartments' concept started almost 40 years ago when a Sunday school class at Bering Drive Church of Christ bought a former Army barrack that had been converted into a fourplex and used it to give free shelter to patients traveling to the Medical Center.

Over the years, a coalition of 22 churches worked to expand the property to 46 units. Volunteers provide maintenance and office staff. That's kept daily costs to \$7 per unit, or just over \$100,000 a year, said Joe Hightower, a professor emeritus at Rice University and one of Hospitality's founders.

"We keep a waiting list of 100, but we could fill another dozen properties like this if they existed."

lynn.cook@chron.com