

Medical Family Therapy

The Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) program at Texas Tech University is one of the longest standing, accredited doctoral programs in the country. The program is well respected nationally, not only for the research activities of the faculty, but also for the quality of the clinical training and subsequent success of its students. Given the close ties between the MFT program, and the major medical centers within the local community, a number of students in the program have participated in externships and internships within a medical setting.

The MFT program entered into a formal agreement with Covenant Health System in the fall of 2005 using funding obtained through the TTU Graduate School. The procedures for a medical family therapy program were developed during the fall with initial referrals received through the department of Pediatric Oncology and the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit of Covenant Children's Hospital in November. To date, over 100 referrals have been obtained under the order of attending physicians to consult the medical family therapy team. Services have been provided by advanced graduate students in MFT under the supervision of two MFT faculty members. Follow-up interactions with referring physicians, treatment team members, and recipient families, reflect that the services have been well received and beneficial to the identified patients and their families.

The program seeks support for the continuation of this newly implemented medical family therapy program. With this support, we will not only be able to continue the program but also to expand the program into the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) and Palliative Care (the care unit that works to relieve or soothe the symptoms of a disease without affecting a cure). This program is a unique opportunity to provide needed support to chronically ill children and their families served at Covenant Children's Hospital, to provide an opportunity for graduate students to be trained in medical family therapy, and also to conduct necessary research in this field.

Need and Benefits of the Program

The adjustment of a family system to life threatening illnesses has been the subject of much clinical and empirical interest since the 1980's. As survival rates for chronic and life threatening diseases in childhood have continued to improve, greater attention has been given to a number of associated concerns involving the family. Relevant areas of interest have included:

- the clinical care and management of the family
- crisis and treatment management during the acute phases of diagnosis and treatment initiation
- parental communication
- sibling adjustment
- psychological adjustment

Specific to cancer, the onset of symptoms in children, the confirmation of a diagnosis of cancer, and, in most cases, the subsequent prolonged participation in treatment, exert considerable demands on the emotional, psychological, and interpersonal resources of the patient and his or her family. The children, their parents, siblings, friends, and broader family and social networks are all simultaneously confronted with the prospect of the child's mortality and the potentially unpleasant rigors of treatment.

Although evidence continues to be obtained that supports the inclusion of family factors in the care of child cancer patients and other critically ill children, scant findings are available to guide treatment professionals or to determine the effectiveness of such services in terms of patient response, family

adjustment, and treatment receptivity. Medical family therapy stands as one alternative that may be more readily available within larger medical care facilities and which may be more easily subjected to empirical scrutiny. Medical family therapy, originating in response to an interest in providing comprehensive integrated healthcare, refers to the systemic, biopsychosocial treatment of individuals and families who are experiencing medical problems.

The continuation of this program will benefit the local community, the larger research community, and Marriage and Family Therapy graduate students. Most importantly, the program offers quality service to chronically ill children and their families served at Covenant Children's Hospital at no cost to them. With mounting medical expenses, it is important that these services are provided to families without acquiring additional costs. While conducting these services, advanced graduate students have access to a unique training opportunity (currently only eight such training sites exist in the United States) in which they are collaborating with doctors, specialists, and nurses in an effort to understand and implement the facets of Medical Family Therapy. In addition, continuation of these services allows for research to be conducted in an effort to facilitate better care for critically ill children and their families, laying the groundwork for the development of other programs throughout the country.

If you want to make a difference in the lives of these children, please contact Dean V. Loehr, Senior Development Officer, at 806-742-3263 or dean.loehr@ttu.edu .