



Pat Camillo counsels a patient in her Hurley office.

Freeman photo by Dan Chidester

Women's ills get new approach

By PATRICE COURTNEY
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HURLEY — The list of health concerns that can enter a woman's life over a lifetime is long, and understanding what happens to one's body does not always go hand-in-hand with treatment.

A pregnancy may end in miscarriage. A young woman may hear that a hysterectomy is in order for her chronic bleeding problem. Menopause may plunge an otherwise cheerful woman into a depression she can't articulate. A breast lump may result in a recommendation of a mastectomy.

Or a woman may find herself frustrated, every month, by mood swings she can't contain which could cause tension between her and loved ones.

Women have traditionally looked to their doctors for words of comfort and explanation. But women are also large consumers of health care, and the average medical office visit today is a brief, to-the-point session with treatment as its sole purpose. A woman who needs more — information or support — may be told to seek counseling.

Physicians are not counselors

But to whom should she turn? The schools of thought on counseling are many.

A new approach was launched in this area last month by Pat Camillo, a clinical nurse specialist with a master's degree in women's health care from the University of Rochester.

"We shouldn't expect physicians to act as counselors. Their years in medical school are filled with learning everything they need to know about the human body; counseling is not part of their training," said Ms. Camillo.

Ms. Camillo does not practice nursing as we know it. Instead, she provides counseling on these and other subjects: premenstrual syndrome, menopause, childbirth, miscarriage, stillbirth, infant death, infertility, gynecological cancer, sexually transmitted diseases, chronic pelvic pain, weight problems, sterilization, hysterectomy, mastectomy and natural family planning.

After 12 years in more traditional nursing roles, Ms. Camillo said she finds the counseling role a natural.

"The state of New York affirmed the role of nurses as educators with the passage of the Nurse Practice Act several years ago. But most settings where nurses are employed are not yet conducive to it," she explained.

Holistic approach

Ms. Camillo emphasizes that hers is a holistic approach to women's health.

"When something happens to a woman's body, as when illness occurs, it involves the whole person, not just her physical parts!" she said.

Her counseling, then, combines emotional support with practical information for understanding and coping with what is happening to a woman's body.

"Just having someone knowledgeable to talk with can make all the difference. I worked with one older woman who had not enjoyed her sex life for years because she thought she was the only one who experienced the lack of lubrication that can come with menopause.

"It was a relief for her to hear she wasn't unusual and that there were solutions," Ms. Camillo said.

She also offers small workshops to prepare couples for childbirth. While these are not unusual in this area, she maintains that her approach is different.

"I believe the Lamaze method was a breakthrough, but it falls short; it's not kept up with the latest technological advances," she said of the well-known child preparation classes that emphasize different kinds of breathing during the phases of childbirth.

Different ways of handling pain

"A more individual approach is necessary for women to discover what works best for them. We all have different ways of handling pain and discomfort, and this class aims to have women get in touch with their own best instincts," she said.

She is critical, too, of the size of most childbirth classes. Accordingly, she accepts no more than five couples per class. They meet for four two-hour workshops and two one-hour private consultations, generally in the last two months of pregnancy.

Her hourly rate for counseling and her fee for the workshops are deliberately low, to make the services available to more women, she said.

Though she hopes for referrals from physicians she has contacted, Ms. Camillo acknowledges that some are reluctant.

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