

SOAR Program Launched at Loyola University Medical Center

BY KATHY EDWARDS

The Phoenix Society's new peer support program, Survivors Offering Assistance in Recovery (SOAR) is soaring at Loyola University Medical Center, according to Barry Bennett, LCSW. Bennett is the social worker for the burn unit and the local SOAR program coordinator. Loyola is one of six hospital burn centers pilot testing the new program. Bennett and burn center director Dr. Richard Gamelli are excited about the opportunity to provide an additional form of support for their patients.

"For years we have known that programs such as Reach for Recovery have been very successful in alleviating anxiety with newly diagnosed cancer

patients. It is great that we now have a formalized approach of providing this type of peer support to our newly diagnosed burn patients and their families," Dr. Gamelli explains.

Twelve peer support volunteers went through the SOAR training program in September 2001. They are now visiting with inpatients and also staffing a hospitality room at the burn center's weekly outpatient clinic. For several years Loyola has had burn survivor volunteers provide coffee, donuts and juice while patients are waiting for their clinic visit. The difference since they implemented the SOAR program is that now the volunteers have been trained and they have a better understanding of their role as peer supporters. They have had more guidance on what to say and the boundaries of the role.

Judy Tomasino is one of the volunteers who works at the outpatient clinic twice a month. She likes being a SOAR volunteer because she likes meeting new people. She notes, "Sometimes the most important thing you can do is just sit back and listen to people." After the clinic she visits with any patient in the unit that wants to talk to someone. One week in January she spent 45 minutes talking to a young man who was going to have a skin graft. Judy explains, "I feel I'm better able to handle situations like that since the SOAR training. The more I do it the more comfortable I feel." Since the program started news has spread through word of mouth. Now other survivors want to get involved.



Peer supporters Connie Doolewerdt, Roy Cappy, and Allan Treest share their experiences at Loyola.

PEER SUPPORT OFFERS HOPE

Diane Gould and her husband, Tim, who sustained a burn injury over more than 90% of his body, are among the first patients and family members at Loyola to receive a peer support visit. Diane almost gave up hope after Tim's injury. Her spirits lifted when she met Tony Gonzalez, who also survived a burn injury on over 90% of his body surface area. "Tony walked into the room wearing shorts and a t-shirt. I was amazed to see that he could walk and talk and he is able to live a normal life," Diane explains. "One of the things that impressed me the most was his attitude. He's been through so much and he can still smile."

Tony is a peer support volunteer with the SOAR program at Loyola University Medical Center. He was chosen to work with Diane and Tim by the program coordinator, Barry Bennett. Bennett timed the first visit carefully, waiting until the medical team felt that Tim would survive his injuries. He also chose a time when Tim's family seemed ready to meet another burn survivor.

"The patients hear from the staff that they are going to be okay, that things will get better. But when patients sit in their rooms and look at their skin and think about how badly they've been injured they wonder if that's really true," Bennett explains. "When they see another burn survivor walk in the room who seems to be leading a fairly normal life again after a burn injury, you can almost see the relief on their faces."

Tony has met with Diane and Tim about six times. On his last visit he took his mother, Marjorie Gonzalez, who was also trained as a peer support volunteer with the SOAR program. Marjorie and Diane felt a special bond as caregivers of burn survivors. Tony explains, "After a while they were practically finishing each other's sentences."

The visits have proved beneficial for Tony as well as Diane and Tim. "It was an interesting role reversal to visit someone in the hospital," Tony reflects. "This time it was me putting on the gloves and the mask. It helped me remember those days in a good way. It helped me see the progress I've made, where I was and where I've come from."

For Diane Gould, the best thing about meeting another burn survivor is that it has given her a renewed sense of hope that Tim can recover from his burn injury. Although Diane and Tim have a long way to go, with the help of peer supporters like Tony and Marjorie they're beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

SECRETS OF A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM

A successful program takes a lot of hard work and planning. Barry Bennett attended a four-hour training course for program coordinators at the World Burn Congress in 2001. He also sat in on the eight-hour training course for volunteers and arranged for them to go through the hospital's local volunteer services orientation. Bennett explains one of the keys to success. "I was very careful in selecting volunteers for this program. I chose volunteers who are good models of recovery. The volunteers are not in there to fix themselves. They have their stuff together. It's important to choose people who are far enough out from their injury, who have worked through most of their own issues." Volunteers must be at least one year out from their injury to qualify for the SOAR program. Barry Bennett chose to start with a small number of volunteers to keep the program manageable.

Bennett explains that another secret of success is getting buy-in from the medical director and also the burn team. He did this by using the program as a quality assurance measure for the burn center. In monthly staff meetings, Bennett explained the program and presented the results of the evaluation forms. A key feature of the SOAR program is that the patients or caregivers who receive support as well as the volunteers who provide peer support fill out an evaluation form. At Loyola the results indicate that patients and their families rated the program 6.7 on a 7-point scale (7= the highest rating). It was easier for Bennett to "sell" the program because it produces measurable results.

Patients have spoken about the program in glowing terms, according to Bennett, and that has also impressed burn center staff. He finds that nurses and other staff members are referring more patients and families to the program to be matched with peer supporters. Bennett likes the fact that the SOAR program is structured so that burn survivors work together with the medical team to provide peer support. He feels that a peer support program can be most successful when survivors and burn care professionals work together instead of separately.

Dr. Gamelli adds, "Our patients have responded very positively to the support of the SOAR volunteers. For several years we have, on a less formal basis, utilized burn survivors to provide peer support and have had a great deal of success with that approach. What the SOAR program brings to the unit is first of all, more volunteer burn survivors, therefore, bringing a greater opportunity to appropriately match patients

with survivors. It also is impressive that the SOAR program is doing follow-ups with the patients to assure the quality of the visits as well as the visitors.”

The SOAR program makes it easier to provide quality peer support for patients and families by standardizing the application, screening, and training process for peer support volunteers. Since the peer supporters have gone through the SOAR program,

Barry Bennett, Dr. Gamelli, and burn center staff feel more confident about the quality of service provided to patients and families. Although there was an initial commitment of time and money to get the program up and running, Bennett feels the SOAR program has been a win-win opportunity for patients, peer support volunteers, and the burn center.

KEYS TO A SUCCESSFUL SOAR PROGRAM:

- Select volunteers carefully.
- Keep the number of volunteers manageable.
- Get burn team and burn physician buy-in.
- Emphasize training.
After attending the SOAR training volunteers are better prepared and know what's expected of them.



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