

BULLETIN

Erica Kang, dietitian

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For many cancer patients, getting enough to eat is a challenge.

At a time when being well-nourished is so essential, they face an array of challenging symptoms - mouth sores, taste changes, changes in saliva, nausea, vomiting, swallowing problems, constipation, and more, all potential side-effects of chemotherapy and radiation. And certain cancers, in particular head and neck cancers, bring further challenges.

This is when HSA member Erica Kang, a registered dietitian at the BC Cancer Agency Centre for the North in Prince George, steps in to offer solutions and support.

Kang begins with a broad-spectrum assessment. "I get their medical and social history, and look at cultural factors, their physical activity levels, and their general functioning. We ask all kinds of questions so we can identify the patient's goals. We then come up with a personal nutrition care plan, and we follow through with monitoring and evaluation."

Family members are invited to be part of this process, because they are often involved in making meals and providing care. Kang also works closely with her team members - pharmacists, nurses, counsellors, doctors, and a speech language pathologist.

Her patients keep her motivated, says Kang. "I find my patients so inspiring. To see them endure so much, to keep going every day, and so often with such great attitudes - that's what brings me back to work each day."

Kang's decision to become a dietitian came from personal experience. "My mom was diagnosed with high blood pressure. The doctor recommended a care plan which included having her start to eat really well. It was neat to see how we changed our way of eating and how it helped with her blood pressure. That inspired me, and when I looked into this profession I liked that it is so broad. There are so many niches and so many opportunities."

Kang studied at the University of British Columbia, earning a Bachelor of Science in Food Nutrition and Health with a major in dietetics. This five-year program includes a one-year internship, which Kang completed in Vancouver. She enjoyed the diversity of experience the internship offered. She was exposed to clinical, administrative, and community work. After graduation, she had a one-year contract in Kitimat, where as the only dietician on staff she did everything from acute care to outpatient counselling. When that was finished, the BC Cancer Agency Centre for the North was just opening, and Kang seized the opportunity to develop an oncology specialization.

A new job at a new facility brought a new opportunity: to be active in her union. Soon after starting at the Cancer Agency, Kang became chief steward. "I got talked into it, and haven't regretted it one bit! I love being here for the members, listening to them, and helping them identify the issues that need attention. It's an essential role.

"I've taken advantage of some great HSA training opportunities. CLC Winter School was amazing. I took a women and leadership course there that motivated me to take more of a leadership role in my community," she says. Kang sits on the executive of the Prince George Cycling Club, a role which sees her advocating to city council for bike lanes, and helping organize events such as bike-to-work week.

Community involvement, as well as cycling, help Kang preserve a healthy work-life balance, which she says is essential in a job where she faces suffering every day. Self-care, good boundaries, and the support of her co-workers help Kang avoid "compassion fatigue" so she can keep showing up each day, inspired and motivated to help her patients get the nourishment they need.

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