

## THREE CHEERS FOR CHIRS

by Nicole Lindquist

When plagued by a health problem or distraught by a diagnosis, patients and their loved ones often turn to the Internet and “Google” medical terminology or search for answers on Web MD.

But, results regularly return an overload of information in which advertisements are indistinguishable from reliable sources and accuracy is questionable.

That’s what Donna Mahlendorf of Blair, Neb., found when she searched for information about her husband Mike’s tongue cancer diagnosis.

Then Mahlendorf, a member of the UNMC Board of Counselors, discovered one of UNMC’s best-kept secrets: the CHIRS program.

CHIRS (Consumer Health Information Resource Service) is a medical resource that has been offered by UNMC’s McGoogan Library since 1985. The free service is available to Nebraska residents, UNMC students and employees, and health care professionals and patients of The Nebraska Medical Center.

Mahlendorf sought peer-reviewed journal articles on how to treat a dying jaw bone after an infection caused severe swelling in Mike’s face. Doctors treated it with hyperbaric oxygen treatments to increase the blood supply that had diminished since chemotherapy and radiation treatments, but the Mahlendorfs were concerned that the cancer cells could get enough oxygen to return.

Research provided by the CHIRS program quashed those fears.

“They sent us a two-inch thick packet of information on treatments and what to expect. For me, a lay person who doesn’t have a medical background, it was extremely helpful,” Mahlendorf said. “There’s a lot of junk on the Internet and you have to leaf through so much before you find what you’re looking for. The McGoogan Library gave us exactly what we needed.”

Mahlendorf shared what she learned about antibiotic treatments with the treatment team at UNMC, a practice encouraged by the CHIRS staff.

“We hope patients share what they learn with their health care providers. Our main goal is a more knowledgeable patient,” said Roxanne Cox, head of the reference department at the McGoogan Library. “When patients use the Internet as a source for information, they don’t always know its quality. Our information is strictly factual, peer-reviewed material.”

As one of the top medical libraries in the nation, the McGoogan Library fills an average of 500 CHIRS requests a year, ranging from breast cancer to West Nile virus.

“Other places charge between \$150 to \$300 for such resources, but we provide people with quality health information free of charge whether they live in Omaha or Valentine, Neb.,” Cox said.

Typically, librarians respond to a CHIRS request with detailed information via e-mail within 24 to 48 hours. If patients request printed material, it may take five to seven days to mail. Cox encourages more people to take advantage of the service, just as the Mahlendorfs did.

“I wish there were billboards to promote CHIRS because it’s an invaluable service,” Mahlendorf said. “When a family member or friend is diagnosed with a disease or condition, everybody scrambles for information because they feel powerless. Knowledge gives you power.”

*\*Editor’s note: As for Mike Mahlendorf, he’s doing well. He celebrated his fifth year in remission this last July.*

Donna Mahlendorf reads through the information gathered by CHIRS.

