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MAGAZINE

THE **ART** OF
WELLBEING



living

HEALING HANDS

Pioneers
Transforming
Cancer Care

By Isabel Burton



Meet the women on a mission to make spa and wellness treatments an accessible resource for enhancing the quality of life for those touched by cancer

Few things compare to the resilience and courage required to navigate a cancer diagnosis. It's a situation laden with uncertainty, hope, and the relentless pursuit of wellness. And in a world where the number of cancer diagnoses is on the rise, with the American Cancer Society projecting over 2 million new cases in the United States alone for 2024, and global numbers approximating 18.1 million people affected in 2020, supportive care beyond conventional medical treatments has become more crucial than ever.

The power of touch, community, and positive thoughtful experiences can be transformative. Recognizing this, key visionaries in the hospitality and wellness industries have been advocating hard for more awareness and knowledge, and for spas and resorts to get onboard to customize treatments that meet the specific needs of individuals facing cancer. And there has been enormous progress—established training programs provide masseuses and aestheticians with adequate skills and know-how, and select skincare brands offer toxic-free formulas. But there's still more work ahead.

The goal: Provide those touched by cancer with the resources to claim a moment of valuable relaxation at any spa, harness the therapeutic benefits of hands-on therapy—which can greatly alleviate anxiety and depression, and, even more, enhance immune function—and make them feel truly cared for. Four women at the forefront of this mission share insights, including their personal history, point-of-view, and future hopes to bring comfort and healing to those in need.

SUE HARMSWORTH, the visionary founder of ESPA, has been a force in the spa and wellness industry for over five decades, shaping the global landscape through a holistic approach. As she witnessed the climbing cancer rates, the specific needs of patients that weren't being addressed by her industry, and the benefits of touch, she established the Standards Authority for Touch in Cancer Care (SATCC) in 2020 in the UK. This accreditation ensures that cancer patients have the option to receive safe, qualified massage therapy services, from diagnosis onward.

I knew we needed SATCC

"During my time at ESPA, where we spanned 600 spas across 60 countries, I saw a disheartening trend: Spas were turning away people with cancer. The surge in diagnoses, with data saying one in two will face cancer in the UK in their lifetime, coupled with a widespread lack of understanding, showed a critical gap in care. Dispelling the myths around massage and cancer was absolutely necessary, and so was providing in-depth training for professionals. We now have a database for over 200 trained spas and salons as a resource for patients.

The program has huge impact on patients and therapists

"SATCC-trained therapists don't just improve the physical conditions of those undergoing treatment;

they revitalize their spirit. Imagine the psychological blow when going to a spa seeking solace, and you're denied. Patients say they feel human again. The program's ripple effect has seen therapists grow in empathy and skill too, which means they're equipped with the heart and intuition to treat a wider clientele with diverse health challenges.

We now need to set our sights on fitness and nutrition

"We're understanding the benefits of fitness and movement as pre-hab and rehab for building muscle strength so cancer treatment recovery is quicker and better. But fitness trainers face the same fears of working with patients without key knowledge, both the medical needs, but also how to react thoughtfully when they have a client with scars, or a mastectomy, or wig. My ambition is to merge fitness, nutrition, and therapy training so cancer patients get a full wellness program.

The future is in prevention

"We now need to shift the focus at spas and resorts toward proactive health maintenance through massage, facials, nutrition, and exercise. These are essential for combating all diseases. The vision is for therapeutic and preventative treatments to become integral to everyone's life. The spa industry can evolve and modernize to play a huge role in supporting holistic health and wellness in a way that meets today's needs."



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JOSANNA GAITHER is bringing her deep passion and extensive experience to launch and lead the U.S. expansion of the Oncology Skin Care Program, an initiative born from the Ricardo Fisas Natura Bissé Foundation in Barcelona, designed to provide specialized care for the skin, which can be profoundly affected by cancer treatments. With time, the U.S. program is geared to replicate the program's overseas success, where it has trained over 1,600 aestheticians and provided over 12,000 treatments. Gaither is on a mission to offer unlimited support and care to those facing cancer through expertise, with a human touch.

We're a go-to for anyone with cancer

"Our program trains professionals in performing skincare treatments to anyone with cancer, in hospitals or spa settings. We very mindfully have made the cost for aestheticians extremely affordable so money isn't a deterrent for getting involved. But we're so much more—we're also here as a resource for anyone facing a diagnosis with virtual consultations and self-care guidance specifically designed for cancer patients. This is all free of charge.

Skincare feeds into cancer care

"Managing the side effects of medical treatments is crucial. If the skin's barrier becomes compromised through radiation burn or dermatitis, doctors might

pause their protocol. Or if a patient has red, raw skin, they may not want to go to their next treatment appointment. Our skincare is designed to strengthen skin before radiation, and help it heal after—so patients are not just comfortable, but can continue with their medical plan. Good skincare feeds into so much—a patient may also start sleeping better because they're not waking up dry and itchy, which is incredibly important.

Healing isn't just a physical thing

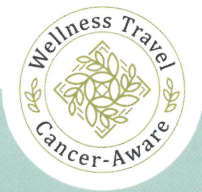
"The feedback from our patients has been profound. Improvements in their skin conditions leads to more confidence and a better understanding of how to care for themselves. To have even a small sense of control over their body and comfort during such a tumultuous time is hugely empowering. And that mindset is crucial to healing.

We're expanding our reach into hair training

"Recognizing the significant impact of hair loss on cancer patients, we've broadened our educational scope to include training for hair and makeup professionals. Our goal is to address one of the most immediate fears upon diagnosis: "I'm going to lose my hair. What can I do?" By educating professionals on these specific needs, we hope to mitigate this fear and provide practical solutions for those affected."

“Resorts need to be mindful of how they speak to people. Let’s stop labeling certain spa services as a ‘cancer treatment.’ An individual touched by cancer is a person just like any other.”

—Julie Bach



Organic Spa’s sister brand, **Wellness Travel University**, offers resources and education for travel advisors, including oncology-verified, cancer-aware training. This program enables advisors to be attuned to physical, emotional, and logistical factors that come into play when planning a trip for someone touched by cancer and equips them with materials, knowledge, and a directory of trained properties so they can confidently support clients on creating a safe and wonderful adventure.

Additionally, Organic Spa Media will be launching an online wellness travel concierge service for consumers, where they’ll have free access to all OSM’s Wellness Travel University Gold Certified Travel Advisors, the majority of whom are also “Wellness Travel Cancer-Aware” certified.

JULIE BACH, an integrative therapist, set a new benchmark in supportive care when she created Wellness for Cancer, a charity that trains a diverse range of professionals, including masseuses, facialists, yoga and health coaches, to deliver expert and tailored treatments in top hotels, spas, and cancer centers. To that end, Bach has forged exclusive partnerships with hospitality brands, such as Six Senses Spas and COMO Shambhala, alongside notable skincare brands like Biologique Recherche, and has established a directory of select properties across 64 countries, making it easier for individuals touched by cancer to find services.

Language really matters

“Resorts need to be mindful of how they speak to people. Let’s stop labeling certain spa services as a ‘cancer treatment.’ An individual touched by cancer is a person just like any other—they don’t want to be defined or limited by their disease. I don’t want a person to see a 30-page spa menu and be told they can only have two services. Almost any treatment can be adapted. We suggest our clients show a symbol, like a purple ribbon, with a simple statement: ‘Our therapists are trained to adapt your service for a variety of conditions.’

Our work goes beyond spa treatments

“Our industry’s venture into wellness is constantly evolving, which is beautiful. From the beginning, I pictured people embarking on immersive retreats aimed at healing and change, and I’m now working with centers to incorporate activities like white water rafting, zip-lining, and mountain hiking, designed to bring a sense of awe and adventure, safely of course, for those touched by cancer. This is how we’re growing in understanding and delivering what those with cancer want and need, this is what I’m jazzed about!

People with cancer need to be empowered to travel

“Another of my ambitions is to empower people on their wellness path to travel confidently, to know that they can do so safely and there are places and travel agents who are trained to help, and guide them on questions to ask when booking. That’s what we’re working hard on. The initiative includes training for all resort staff, from the front desk to chefs, because it’s our duty to ensure a thoughtful and holistic approach to wellness travel that integrates spa treatments, movement, sleep, and overall experiences to those with cancer.”

KAREN BALLOU was suddenly hit hard midway through a prominent career as a beauty executive, master esthetician, and formulator: Hodgkin's lymphoma. Chemotherapy's impact on her skin was an education in the importance of skin immunity, and in toxic-free products. That awakening inspired Ballou to create Immunocologie, a skincare line that focuses on enhancing skin's natural defenses through formulas rich in minerals and that work specifically to balance the microbiome, strengthen the barrier, and optimize moisture levels—tailoring to the precise needs of those with cancer. Just recently, Immunocologie announced its partnership with Blue Zones, joining forces in their shared commitment to enhanced longevity and wellbeing.

Our hero ingredient is powerful and unique

“At the time I was diagnosed, I had been working with a French ethnobotanist looking into the properties of local green clay. Its antibacterial, antimicrobial, and anti-inflammatory qualities were outstanding, so I started using the extracted mineral water on my skin, and drinking it. That mineral water became essential to my comfort and recovery—chemo is rough on the esophagus and drinking the water alleviated that, along with my skin dryness and rawness. Now, the mineral water is in every product we make.

My light bulb moment

“I started to scrutinize the toxins in skincare and it was alarming. Skin is our largest organ and we're covering it with harmful ingredients. This needs to stop. I wanted to create something that's clean and healing, and that those with cancer can trust wholeheartedly, because this is a tumultuous time and they can't afford to be misled. I've had cancer, so I know that a compromised skin microbiome from drugs and treatments is a big issue, along with sensitivity, dryness, and skin thinning. The line gives people an easy skin protocol that's designed to repair all of those issues. At the same time, it makes the complexion beautiful, because we all want that, not just people without a diagnosis. It's critical that we use products that support the body's internal processes as well as external. And cancer patients especially must know what's going on, and in, their skin.

There's so much more to do

“I speak to people with cancer all the time and my goal is to get more patients to become familiar with good ingredients so they don't go backwards and use chemicals on their skin post treatments. Down the road, I see expanding into hospitals and providing essential care kits. In the end, I advocate for healthier skincare choices but also for a deeper understanding of the profound connection between skin health and overall wellbeing.” ◉



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—Karen Ballou