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By Bruce Miller

When the going gets tough, expect the tough to express their feelings on a T-shirt.

How's "Death: Been there. Done that. Got the T-shirt"? Or "Got morphine?" What about "Dude, where's my leg?"

Folks with chronic illnesses find them oddly comforting – a way to open up about their disease and bond with others who may suffer from the same problem.

Dr. Westby Fisher, director of cardiac electrophysiology at Evanston Northwestern Healthcare, Evanston, Ill., came up with the idea when he noticed how many of his patients with heart rhythm disorders were frightened by their situation.



"Vice President Dick Cheney has an automatic defibrillator in his chest and he doesn't view it as a scary thing. For him, it's a life insurance policy. But others don't think that way."

Talking about the condition – or letting others know about it – could be a way to ease some of that tension, he says. So when an article in the Wall Street Journal talked about on-line T-shirt sales, Fisher put the two together and came up with Med-Tees, a T-shirt company that announces illness the way rock stars promote their latest concert tours.

Fisher started with defibrillator shirts ("Careful, I'm Wired," "You think that's shocking? Try standing me next to a microwave," "I really AM a baby boomer"), then branched out when a cancer survivor and friend had a leg amputated. ("Dude, where's my leg?")

Quickly, the ideas started coming. While Fisher does most of the artwork (and some of the catchphrases), he gets more than half his ideas from patients.

"Pain, the friendly reminder that you're not dead" was suggested by one. "Look ma, no hands" came from a double amputee.

"You'll find a lot of gallows humor," he

"These shirts empower patients. They get people to talk."

Dr. Westby Fisher

FIT TO A T

T-shirts help wearers cope with chronic illnesses

says. "But the slogans have to be fairly clever. We take ones that resonate with a large group of people."

As a result, diabetes, cancer and heart disease have more than a few offerings. In exchange, 10 percent of the shirts' proceeds go to charitable organizations associated with the disease.

"It's my charity work," Fisher says. "I'm not in this to make a zillion dollars. I'm

trying to connect patients with similar problems, disseminate information about issues and, most of all, help people accept their chronic illness."

Often, he says, friends bring a Med-Tee to a someone in the hospital who's facing a medical problem. "It makes people smile. You're taking a tough situation and letting the person know they're not in this alone."

Take diabetes, for example. Because so many children are affected, Fisher needed something they'd relate to. How 'bout a gila monster staring out beneath the words "Lick diabetes"? The connection? Byetta, a drug for diabetes, is made from the saliva of gila monsters.

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Support groups are particularly fond of the tees. Fisher says it's common to see large orders coming from a specific community once the word reaches them.

In the year that Med-Tees has been around, more than 160 designs have been created. "Even the goofiest ideas have sold," he says with a laugh. "We haven't begun to scratch the surface. We've got a lot of diseases we can address."

Working about an hour a night on the designs, Fisher says he gets as many as 10 e-mails a day from fans.

His favorite? One for obsessive compulsives. It shows a pencil out of order and the words "Bother you?"

"That always gets a smile from people," he says. "I've been fortunate. My health has been pretty good. But whenever I wear the 'Careful I'm wired' shirt, I get patients talking. A lot of good can come from these things."

And a lot of jokes. Because they have to be kid-friendly, Fisher doesn't proceed with off-color concepts. "You can imagine the suggestions we've gotten for GI disorders or colonoscopies," he says.

Still, a semi-colon centered on a shirt begs the question, "What does that mean?" For someone with Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis, it's a great way to break the ice.

Med-Tees are available at www.cafe-press.com/medtees/. Fisher says some 4,000 items (including bumper stickers, mugs and hats) are in the line. And more are on the way.



Med-Tees come in a variety of styles and phrases. They cover just about every disease. They also can be put on mugs, hats and other novelty items.

