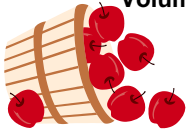




Touch of Courage

. Connection Beyond Pink TEAM

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SURVIVING BREAST CANCER: LESSONS LEARNED

By Pat Buls

Invasive ductal carcinoma – three words that forever changed my life.

(like myself) however, have no identifiable risk factors.

As my husband and I listened to the surgeon explain this type of breast cancer to us, I sat in stunned silence. All I could think was, “How can this be happening to me? There is so much I want to do. I don’t have time for this!”

Lesson 2: Mammograms are not perfect. Mammograms detect only about 85 percent of breast cancers, but they are the best and most feasible detection method at the present time. In my instance, the tumor was detected not by mammography, but by my primary physician during my yearly check-up, and later with an ultrasound. The next step was a breast biopsy which was positive for cancer. I was devastated when the sentinel node was positive. The surgeon removed the next three lymph nodes, which were thankfully negative. He then did a modified radical mastectomy to prevent cancer recurrence and I was home in two days. The time from the tumor biopsy through surgery was less than a week.

I had a mammogram every year since age 45 and like my primary physician, I thought the pea-sized lump was only a benign cyst because of my history of fibrocystic breast disease. There was no known history of breast cancer in my family. I had healthy lifestyle behaviors. As an educator and home health nurse, I tried to be a role model to students and patients and “practice what I preached”. So how could this be happening to me? Although a nurse for over 35 years, I soon discovered this cancer experience was to be one of learning indeed.

Lesson 3: Rely on experts. There is no way one can absorb the emotional and physical trauma of such a personal and life-altering event in such a short time, regardless of previous knowledge or experience. The amount of stress was overwhelming. I cannot overstate the importance of having professionals you can trust and feel totally comfortable with because at this time both my husband and I were numb and functioning on autopilot. The numbness was definitely beneficial though; it blurred the emotional pain and shock so we could get through it.

Lesson 1: Breast cancer doesn’t discriminate. Breast cancer can affect anyone; one in eight women in the United States will develop breast cancer in her lifetime. Breast cancer is the leading cause of death in women ages 20 to 59. There are certain risk factors for breast cancer and they include being female, postmenopausal (77 percent of breast cancer patients are over 50) early menarche and having a genetic predisposition. About 85 percent of breast cancer patients

Lesson 4: Never assume you know what it's really like unless you've been there.

Because I had a malignant lymph node, I knew I would have chemotherapy after the mastectomy. I felt fairly knowledgeable about it since I had cared for patients with chemo both in the hospital and at home and had lectured on this topic to nursing students. I soon discovered otherwise. I had four cycles of Adriamycin and Cytosan, two major and very potent drugs for breast cancer. The first cycle went well but the antiemetic did not work for the second one and I was hospitalized for dehydration and electrolyte imbalances. With some experimenting, the oncologist and I learned what medications worked for me and I did reasonably well after that. Eating was a challenge and my husband got quite creative at preparing appetizing meals and snacks.

Of course I lost all my hair – two weeks to the day after the first treatment. I still can remember standing in the shower and crying as it fell out – a depressing day indeed. The fatigue from the chemo seemed to be incremental; I would just start to feel good again and then it was time for the next cycle. I cut back to part-time at work and did only the necessary things at home. Most of all, I learned to depend on others.

Chemo can affect cognitive function. Known as “chemobrain” this syndrome affects as many as 17 to 50 percent of breast cancer patients and can include memory loss and difficulty with concentration, cognitive processing speed, attention span and spatial perception. Effects can persist for a number of years after chemotherapy treatment. I have been fortunate

because I had only mild residuals but can readily empathize with the frustration of patients who have experienced it to a greater degree. Just knowing it was a consequence of chemo was comforting and doing mental exercises such as reading and crossword puzzles has helped considerably, as well as maintaining the best state of health possible.

Lesson 5: Let go and let others.

I don't know how I would have survived this experience without the love and support of family, colleagues and friends. As a home care nurse I have seen what family support (or lack of it) can do for a patient's recovery and prognosis. My husband was always there, hugging me and encouraging me to look ahead to the next day when I would feel better. Our children called faithfully or came to visit as did friends and colleagues. And it somehow seemed when I was having a really rotten day, there was always a phone call, card or gift to cheer me up.

Lesson 6: Believe in yourself and always have hope.

We never know the extent of our courage until we are called upon to use it. At first, there is only the numbness and denial, but these reactions serve as protective mechanisms to get us through that critical time until we can deal with reality. I cannot count the times I said, “This isn't for real. It is only a dream and I will wake up soon.” When the reality did set in I knew I could face it because, by then, I had gained the strength and courage to do so.

Sometimes the anger was overpowering (Why me God? What did I do to deserve this?), but realizing it was a normal reaction made it much easier to acknowledge and then move on. As

my surgeon said, “Don't look back.” I tried to direct all my energy toward physical, emotional and spiritual healing and becoming whole again. With each new day I tried to have hope, because hope is what keeps us going and gives purpose to our lives.

Lesson 7: We can survive if we choose to survive.

I don't know what the future holds for me but neither does anyone else, for that matter. I am on daily tamoxifen for five years to prevent cancer recurrence, and I am faithful in my follow-up care. I have learned to trust in my higher power and take one day at a time, to “let go and let God”. If something doesn't get done today, there is tomorrow and if tomorrow doesn't come, then it's a moot point anyway. I have become an advocate for breast cancer prevention and have done numerous presentations on it in my community. I am doing everything I can to increase my chances of survival and to help other breast cancer survivors do likewise. I am not letting the cancer control my life. I choose to be a survivor!

Lesson 8: Learn from each life experience.

If anyone were to ask me if I wanted to have breast cancer, the answer would be a resounding NO! I had no choice in getting breast cancer, but I do have a choice in how I deal with it. I chose to learn from this experience and make it a positive one. I believe I am now a better person and nurse because I truly can empathize with patients and say, “I know how you feel.” I have walked a mile in some of your shoes.

Lesson 9: Realize what is important.

Having a life-threatening illness has made me more aware of the really important things: being more compassionate,

less critical and really listening to others; in other words realizing that relationships and not things, are what really count. I try to see the beauty and uniqueness of each day and seize the moment.

Lesson 10: Develop a philosophy of life and stay with it. This cancer experience has made me a wiser, more reflective individual. It has made me aware that we are all on a journey in this life. Some experiences will be good and some not so good. But we can make that journey easier for each other by sharing it, embracing both the good and bad times together and realizing that we are never alone. I also believe that we each need to develop a philosophy for our journey, some guiding principles to keep us on track. My philosophy is short and simple but it says it all for me:

Yesterday is a done deal,
Tomorrow is a maybe,
But today is mine to appreciate
and enjoy,
And to make a difference.

This article was edited for length with the author's permission.

Bibliography for this article is posted on the Cedar Valley Breast Cancer website:
www.cedarvalleybreastcancer.org

Support the Komen Des Moines Race for the Cure

Be a pink ribbon runner/walker by supporting the Komen Des Moines Race for the Cure on Saturday October 28, 2006 – Des Moines. The **Beyond Pink TEAM**, a program of the Cedar Valley Cancer Committee, is inviting

women and men to join their local team representing Black Hawk County and surrounding communities to raise money for this important annual event.

Every year the Des Moines Affiliate of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation supports education and no cost mammograms to women and men in its 81 counties. Black Hawk County has received over \$150,000 for education and mammogram services for persons living in northeast Iowa as a result of money raised from the annual Race for the Cure. In-person participation on race day or donations as a pink ribbon runner/walker will support this important community event that gives back to Black Hawk County and northeast Iowa. For more information on how to register for the Komen Des Moines Race for the Cure and join the Beyond Pink TEAM:

Contact the Black Hawk County Health Department at 291-2413 or register on-line before October 14, 2006 with the **Beyond Pink TEAM** at:
<http://www.desmoinesraceforthe cure.org/asp/RaceRegistration.asp>
(upper right corner of web page: Registration; Join a Team: **Beyond Pink TEAM**).

Pesticides and Cancer

Pesticides and Cancer: Acting on What We Already Know? is the topic of a community forum presented by Cedar Valley Cancer Committee's Beyond Pink TEAM and Iowa Breast Cancer Edu-action. Dr. Kamyar Enshayan, Program Manager at the Center for Energy and Environmental Education at the University of Northern Iowa, will present recent evidence linking a

variety of commonly used weed killers and insecticides to cancer and other chronic diseases. He will discuss prevention strategies for individuals and the community.

The forum will take place 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. on Thursday, October 26 in Seminar Room B at Area Education Agency 267 Conference Center, 3712 Cedar Heights Drive, Cedar Falls. The event is free and open to the public.

Touch of Courage Breast Cancer Support Group

The Touch of Courage Breast Cancer Support Group continues to meet on the first Monday of every month (unless it's a holiday). They meet at the Kimball Ridge Center on 2101 Kimball Avenue. The meetings are held at 1:30 and 5:30 p.m.



Kimball Ridge Center

The Support Group invites any woman or man who is dealing with breast cancer to attend the support group meetings. Spouses and significant others are also welcome.

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Breast Cancer and the Voting Booth

Iowa Breast Cancer Edu-Action members understand that the causes and cures for breast cancer won't be found only in test tubes. They must be fought for. Before you vote on November 7, find out where your candidate stands on access to comprehensive quality care for all.

Any system of health care coverage must include these core values:

Access: Individuals must be able to get all the care they need when they need it.

Information: Individuals must receive information that is evidence-based, objective, complete and correct.

Choice: Individuals must have some choice of doctors and care.

Respect: Our health care system must treat the whole person, not just the person's disease.

Accountability: Standards regarding care must be clear, uniform, and enforceable. Patients must have a right to sue if their basic human right to health care is violated.

Improvement: The health care system must have methods for measuring what is and what is not working so that care can continuously improve. Individuals must have access to well designed and efficiently run clinical trials and must have coverage for all associated routine care costs.

Make breast cancer history – VOTE!

Support and Rehabilitation Programs

Care and Share	Support group for anyone dealing with cancer. Meets the 1 st Tuesday of every month at 1:30 p.m.
Touch of Courage	Breast cancer support group. Meets the 1 st Monday of every month at 1:30 p.m. and 5:30 p.m.
Reach to Recovery	Provides information and support for women who are faced with breast cancer. Visits available before and after surgery.
Look Good...Feel Better	Consultation with a trained cosmetologist to help a cancer patient feel more comfortable with the physical changes that occur during treatment.

For more information call the American Cancer Society at 319-272-2880 or 888-266-2064.

Resources Available:

Information, support, counseling, and educational materials are available from the following:

Allen College of Nursing Library and Media Center 1825 Logan Avenue Waterloo, IA 50703 (319) 235-2005	American Cancer Society 2101 Kimball Avenue, Suite 130 Waterloo, IA 50702 319-272-2880 or 888-266-2064 1-800-ACS-2345 (available 24 hrs)
Breast Care Center at United Medical Park 1753 West Ridgeway Waterloo, IA 50701 319-833-6100	Covenant Cancer Treatment Center 200 E. Ridgeway Avenue Waterloo, IA 50702 319-272-2800 Include Cancer Information Library
National Cancer Institute 1-800-4CANCER	National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship 1-505-764-9956
National Lymphedema Network 1-415-923-3680	Y-Me 1-800-986-8228
Covenant Lymphedema Therapy 319-272-7894	Physical Therapy Partners Lymphedema Therapy 319-233-6995

Connect with us...

A donation for Touch of Courage is both needed and appreciated. All donations go to support the services of the Cedar Valley Cancer Committee and are tax deductible.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

\$ _____ amount of donation

General Donation Newsletter Donation NBCC Scholarship Fund

Make checks payable to the Cedar Valley Cancer Committee and send to 1607 Heath Street, Waterloo, IA 50703