

BULLETIN

Fighting breast cancer with help from skilled colleagues

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everything has been great ... Ive been lucky," says laboratory technologist Katie Fulop. It may come as a surprise to know that with these upbeat words she is describing her experience with breast cancer.

Katie Fulop Medical Laboratory Technologist Chief Steward Mission Memorial Hospital
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-Ive kept a positive attitude, which is key," explains Fulop. -I made a decision from day one that I could handle it, that it wasnt the end of my life, and that I could cope and survive."

While Fulop doesnt pretend that finding a lump in her breast in early 2003 was anything other than scary and upsetting, she allows herself a chuckle when describing the diagnostic process.

After having a mammogram, and later an ultrasound at her workplace in Mission, she was waiting for further testing. An opening came up when she was on shift and the technologist across the hall asked if she could come over for a core sample.

-I was the only one on the shift," she says, and thats when she lets the chuckle out. -So I went over on my coffee break, believe it or not, and had the sample done. Then I went back to work, with a little bit of gauze under my bra."

The bad news came four days later. -It was quite an aggressive form of cancer and quite large ... big enough to put me into stage II," she says. Ten days later she had a lumpectomy and removal of 16 lymph nodes.

-The time from the first doctors visit to surgery was one month, which was quite phenomenal," says Fulop.

After surgery came six months of chemotherapy and then five weeks of radiation. The bulk of her treatment was at the Fraser Valley Cancer Centre in Surrey.

She has only glowing words to say about the treatment she received, and the people ... many of them HSA members ... who provided it.

-I cant say enough good things about the people I dealt with. The way they treated me at Surrey gave me a warm, fuzzy, welcome feeling. They were wonderful," she says.

Perhaps because she is someone who recognizes the importance of a positive mind-set, Fulop supplemented her medical treatment with other "treatments" aimed at nourishing her attitude: availing herself of counselling when she needed it, as well as supplementary programs that improved her ability to cope with the whole cancer-treatment process.

-I did a program called Look Good, Feel Good, with a hairdresser and a cosmetician. It focused on how to deal with the alopecia, how to use fake eyelashes and draw in eyebrows; we looked at head gear, and we got kits with cosmetics. It was wonderful.

-I also took a meditation course at the Fraser Valley Cancer Clinic. It was only for cancer patients, and it was actually kind of great," she says, sounding a bit surprised.

-It wasn't a religious experience; anyone can use the tools the teacher gave us to get in touch with the feelings they're going through and to de-stress."

She also participated in a physiotherapy program to help her get fit enough to return to work.

-It takes three to six months after treatment to get your energy back. I felt very tired," she says. -The physiotherapy program motivated me to get back into fitness, which is now a priority for me.

-I'm not going to take my health for granted," she says. -I'm eating well and exercising well. This is a lifelong commitment I've made to myself."

Fulop was an enthusiastic Run for the Cure participant before her cancer diagnosis, serving as a team captain in 2002. She is, understandably, even more enthusiastic now, and again has signed up for team captain. At interview time she was training for a 60k walk (over two days) to end breast cancer.

Her commitment to self-care is only part of a deeper restructuring of her priorities, motivated by her experience with cancer.

-It has made me prioritize what's important. I don't get as upset about the little things. It puts everything into perspective. It really brings forward the point that we're not here forever. You know how you procrastinate, saying "one day, one day ... well, you realize that one day may not come, so you decide what you want to do and you do it," she says.

Fulop returned to work six months after her treatment ended, beginning part time and gradually moving up to full-time work at Mission Memorial. But while Fulop is putting cancer behind her, her employer is taking a detailed look at it. Fulop is one of 10 staff from the Mission Memorial lab to have had cancer recently.

-Six of us had breast cancer and four had various other cancers, including two ovarian cancers, lymphoma, and thyroid," says Fulop. -They are investigating it right now, and have taken the first step, which is to identify that yes, there is a cluster of unknown origin. Now they have to investigate to see if it's workplace-related.

-The employer has been really good in trying to deal with this, after our members continued raising the issue with them," says Fulop.

She also has praise for HSAs role in promoting occupational health and safety.

-HSA has been very proactive in this. Members have been made very aware of workplace safety," she says.

She sees the results of this every day at work. -Safety standards in our lab have been high. We have a lab safety officer who has been through HSA safety steward training. Every hospital should have one." 

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