

Diagnosis breast cancer: a chief steward fights back, with help from fellow members

October 1, 2000

The Report: October 2000 vol.21 num.5

by CAROLE PEARSON

If there can be a bright side to breast cancer, Mary Hatlevik has found one. Hatlevik is a registered psychiatric nurse at Trail Regional Hospital and Chief Steward for HSAs Trail Regional Chapter.

Mary Hatlevik Registered Psychiatric Nurse Trail Regional Hospital
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Last March, she went to TRHs Radiology Department for her annual mammogram. Employed at the hospital since 1982, Hatlevik had gotten to know many of the people on staff. "A good friend of mine did the mammogram," she recalls, "but instead of taking just two views as is normally done, she decided to take a third view. That was where they found it."

"It" turned out to be a four millimeter early stage malignant tumour, diagnosed following surgery eight weeks later.

In May, Hatlevik was the first of 25 patients to be used in a control group of TRHs new \$40,000 sentinel lymph node probe, which is used to detect lymph node involvement. Her sentinel lymph node biopsy was to be followed by an axillary lymph node dissection. Although a trial run three weeks prior had been successful, the lymphoscintigraphy did not work on Hatlevik that day, so she had a routine axillary dissection.

In August, Hatlevik had 16 radiation treatments at the BC Cancer Agency in Vancouver. Back home in Rossland, there were follow-up visits with a radiation oncologist from BC Cancer Agency at the Outreach Cancer Clinic, routine visits with her doctor, and possible tamoxifen treatment.

HSA members at work: Mammographers provide first-line diagnosis of a breast lump. Ultrasonographers define and biopsy the breast lump. Cytotechnologists and lab technologists provide preliminary diagnosis of biopsy slides. Nuclear medicine technologists perform tests to determine whether the disease has metastasized. Radiation therapists plan and deliver radiation treatment to help prevent the spread of the disease Pharmacists provide and monitor the drug and chemotherapy regimen while educating patients and their families. Dietitians develop dietary plans to ensure proper nutrition during treatment and recovery. Social workers provide support and counselling to women and families who are dealing with the disease. Physiotherapists and occupational therapists provide rehabilitation to restore strength, movement and function following breast cancer surgery.

What made the experience a positive one for Hatlevik were the people she came in contact with. "It was fantastic having the lab, medical imaging, and physiotherapy done by people I knew. It was a pretty special feeling." Hatleviks strength was bolstered by the support she received from her colleagues as they performed their jobs. "It was the same with the radiation therapists in Vancouver at the BC Cancer Agency. You dont expect radiation to be a positive experience but the therapists were outstanding - a great bunch, and so very positive."

She also commends the BC Cancer Agencys Patient and Family Counseling Department for their Relaxation Support Group. There are 19 of these groups around the province. Hatlevik attended the one in Vancouver offered four times a week. Classes were conducted by two social workers who used techniques such as music tapes, visualization and progressive muscle relaxation. "It reduces stress big-time," says Hatlevik. She found it also helped being with a group of people "where everybody...is dealing with the same issues."

She sounds upbeat about her experience. "The neat part is most of the people Ive dealt with have been HSA members. Its special to think of all the people with all these skills within the same union."

In 1997, HSA became a regional sponsor of the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundations "Run for the Cure." This year, HSA will contribute \$25,000 plus donations made by individual members. Region 3 Director Cheryl Greenhalgh is chair of HSAs "Run for the Cure" steering committee. She describes HSAs sponsorship of the run as "a great fit for our membership who are 85 per cent female, and a large percentage of them work with breast cancer patients and their families. On both a personal and professional level, for most members, this is an important topic. The obvious benefit from the program is the money raised to further breast cancer research."

But there are other, smaller benefits to those taking part, as Greenhalgh enthusiastically points out. "You get a great sense of community by participating. Im on a team with some of my co-workers and after we run, we go out together for lunch. And there are some people whose co-workers have breast cancer so the Run is a good way to support them."

This year, the Run for the Cure will be held on October 1 in six communities in BC. Abbotsford is new to the list and joins Vancouver, Victoria, Nanaimo, Kelowna and Kamloops. Hatlevik intends to take part even though shell have to travel from Rossland to Kelowna to do so. She has been a volunteer for the past 18 years with the Canadian Cancer Society, and has been involved with the Terry Fox Run - either as a volunteer or participant - since its inception 20 years ago. This will be her first time with the Run for the Cure. After her own bout with breast cancer, the issue has taken on a new personal significance.

Hatlevik emphasizes, "Women really need to be more pro-active about their health. Theres so much they can do. They can do breast self-examinations every month, see their doctor every year for a breast exam and get an annual mammogram. All three are important for early detection - no single approach can detect all breast cancers and each assesses the breast in a different way."

Of the lump that was detected in her own breast, she says, "Mine was so small it couldnt be felt and I dont know how long it would have taken before it could. I could have been sloppy and waited and it might have taken another year. I dont know how much it would have grown by then and that kind of scares me. Thats why its so important women have these exams done."

Money raised by the Run for the Cure enables the Foundation to give grants to projects like breast screening units and group counseling services. Through its sponsorship of the Run for the Cure, HSA hopes to increase awareness of breast cancer while advancing breast cancer research and treatment. Greenhalgh calls the Run "a great experience" and says, "I want to encourage as many people to participate as I can."

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