

Ovarian cancer survivor pays it forward

Thanks to a woman who shared her story in print, a Nova Scotian detected her disease early and is hoping to help others do the same

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Brenda Reynolds sat down with a coffee and began leafing through the morning paper when an article caught her eye: " 'Cancer that whispers' creeps up on women."

As the Richmond, B.C., woman read the article on ovarian cancer, a sick feeling washed over her. "The words hit me like a ton of bricks," she said. "I knew right away: This is what Cheryl has."

Cheryl Heffler is her sister, whom she had just visited in Fall River, N.S.

During that visit, Ms. Heffler really wasn't feeling well. She complained of bloating, abdominal pain, the need to urinate frequently, and a general malaise. More than one person said she looked pregnant - not a possibility at age 58.

Yet, it was uncanny that they were the exact symptoms described in the newspaper article.

Ms. Reynolds picked up the phone and called. "I'm the big sister. I can be a bit bossy. I told her to get to the doctor."

The next morning, Ms. Heffler visited her family doctor and told her about the newspaper article.

Now, a lot of people visit their physicians and emergency rooms with newspaper clippings and printouts from websites in hand and, invariably, they are convinced they have a grave, potentially fatal disease such as cancer and, almost invariably, they have some minor ailment, if anything.

Still, Ms. Heffler's doctor took her concerns seriously, and doubly so after she touched the tender "pregnancy" belly.

An ultrasound and CT scan were performed, as well as a blood test for a protein called C-125, which can indicate the presence of a cancerous tumour.

Ms. Heffler was diagnosed with ovarian cancer - an illness that, days before, she only vaguely knew existed.

Just over a month later, she underwent a hysterectomy (removal of the ovaries and uterus) and then chemotherapy, which began on Halloween and ended on Valentine's Day.

Ms. Heffler readily admits that, without her sister's prodding, she would have done nothing. Like many women her age, she assumed her symptoms were related to menopause and would pass.

In fact, the most unusual aspect of her story is that Ms. Heffler was diagnosed in the early stages of ovarian cancer, which is almost unheard of.

"By the time patients get to us, the diagnosis is usually quite obvious and the cancer quite advanced," said Wylam Faught, chief of the department of obstetrics and gynecology at Ottawa Hospital.

The challenge, he said, is for general practitioners to diagnose ovarian cancer early, given the rather vague symptoms and the fact that those symptoms are virtually identical to other far more common conditions such as urinary tract infection and inflammatory bowel disease.

"Ideally what we want is for primary practitioners to have ovarian cancer somewhere in their mind when doing a differential diagnosis," said Dr. Faught, who is also a board member of Ovarian Cancer Canada.

He said making women aware of the symptoms of ovarian cancer is important to ensure the illness is caught early when it's treatable.

"But, there's a fine balance: We don't want a stampede of women to physicians based on vague symptoms," Dr. Faught added.

An estimated 2,500 women will be diagnosed with ovarian cancer and 1,700 women will die from the disease in 2008, according to projections done by the National Cancer Institute of Canada. It is one of the most deadly forms of cancer because early detection rates are so dismal.

Next Sunday, Sept. 7, almost three years to the day from her diagnosis, Ms. Heffler plans to participate in the Winners Walk of Hope, a fundraiser for Ovarian Cancer Canada. She will walk in Halifax.

Ms. Reynolds, her sister, will do the same walk, but in Vancouver.

Both plan to urge all the ovarian cancer survivors they meet to tell their stories, to help raise awareness about the "cancer that whispers."

"There is no doubt that newspaper article saved my life," Ms. Heffler said. "So I'm so thankful to the woman who told her story."

"And maybe," Ms. Reynolds added. "Another article will save another woman. Or two, or three."