

Breast cancer is survivable — take my mother as one example

BY ANDREA BREAU

WINNIPEG (CUP) - My mother Evelyn is going to be a breast cancer survivor.

At age 53 she was working as a senior administrative assistant and leading a mostly normal and healthy lifestyle.

Then came the lump. Last June, a routine mammogram turned up a malignant cancer in my mother's breast.

"I was half-expecting [the diagnosis], and I questioned my own morality at that point," my mother says. "But I wasn't going to wring my hands saying I was going to die. I was going to fight this."

My mother had a lumpectomy, a surgical operation to remove the tumour from the breast. She is currently undergoing radiation oncology treatment to kill any remaining cancer cells. Her prognosis is good.

But my mom is one of the lucky ones. Doctors found her cancer early and it had not spread, so her chances of survival are excellent — as high as 95 percent after the first five years, according to the

Canadian Cancer Society.

"I'm optimistic that I'm going to be fine," she says. "I look around at other patients (at the cancer treatment centre) and I realize I could be worse off than I am. There are people who are fighting a far bigger battle than my own."

Unfortunately, my mother's case is not unusual.

Breast cancer doesn't spare any particular group of women. All women are at risk for developing breast cancer at some point during their lives.

In 1995, the American Cancer Society estimated that 182,000 new cases of breast cancer were diagnosed and that approximately 46,000 women died from the disease. What that translates to is that approximately one in eight women will get the disease over the course of a lifetime.

Among the facts:

— Breast cancer is the most common form of cancer in women and the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths in women, after lung cancer.

— 80 percent of all cancers are found in women over the age of 50.

— 70 percent of women who develop breast cancer have no known risk factors.

— Breast cancer is found more frequently in women who are older, obese and who eat a high-fat diet.

— A woman is also considered at a higher risk if she has a mother, sister or daughter who has been diagnosed with breast cancer, says Kathy Thomson, a nurse educator with the Hope Breast Cancer Centre in Winnipeg. But it's more complicated than simply having a family history of the disease. "It's a multi-factorial disease," Thomson says. "There are probably a number of factors in developing breast cancer, but it's difficult to predict just who will get the disease."

— Only five percent of breast cancer cases in North America are thought to be related to a breast cancer gene discovered in 1994.

— Mammograms (special x-rays of the breast) can detect more than 90 percent of all

cancers, and are a recommended part of every woman's breast health program, along with breast self-examination and physical exam by a doctor.

— Treatment options for breast cancer include surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy. When cancer is found early, lumpectomy (removal of the tumour from the breast) and radiotherapy are effective for most patients. Researchers are currently investigating the role that lifestyle factors such as nutrition, alcohol, exercise, smoking and oral contraceptives may play in cancer prevention.

Thomson notes that estrogen levels seem to have an impact — women who begin their periods before the age of 11 or reach menopause after age 45 are also at increased risk.

As for the link between oral contraception and breast cancer, the jury is still out.

"There is an association with female hormones (and breast cancer), but that association is not fully clear," Thomson explains.

However, there are preventative measures that women can take to lower their risk of breast cancer.

"Basically, all the things that you would do to reduce your risk of heart disease are actually the similar types of measures that you would take to reduce your risk of breast cancer," said Thomson.

Regular exercise, maintaining a healthy weight and eating a low-fat diet with lots of fruits and vegetables are helpful.

"(These sorts of lifestyle choices) are associated with keeping a strong immune system. And if your cells are mutating, which is what cancer is, your own body will look after those cells before cancer becomes established."

Thomson also advises women



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to learn how to do breast self-examinations. And young women in particular, she says, need to learn how to examine themselves properly.

"Because university students tend to be quite young, the risk (for developing breast cancer) is not high," said Thomson. "You don't do breast self-examinations when you're young to detect breast cancer, you do (them) to learn how your breasts feel, what they're like, so that if there are changes, you can recognize those changes."

Breast cancer patients often face worries about more than just their own health. My mother was concerned about her friends and family members and the shock and fear they were going through.

"I was seriously concerned about the affect [my disease] would have on my friends and family, my husband, and my daughter. I didn't like to upset them or cause them concern."

Indeed, cancer happens to a whole family, says Thomson.

"Breast cancer is a family disease. It affects the whole, total family quite significantly, often emotionally," she says.

The emotional side of breast cancer is something I can attest to. Besides my overwhelming concern for my mother's health, her mortality and my family's emotional well-being, I also remember the pain of losing a paternal aunt to the same disease. I naturally worry about my own future health.

Advances in the area

of breast cancer research will most likely continue to be slow, but they may be the only realistic hope for lowering the death rate from breast cancer.

In the meantime, the ultimate hope is preventing this awful disease, perhaps through early detection and perhaps by modifying our environment and learning more through research.

A Chronology of Women in Canada

1500s — Iroquois society in North America was matrilineal (establishing kin depended on the maternal line) and matrilocal (a male, uniting with a female, moved in with the woman's kin).

circa 1600 — The constitution of the Iroquois Confederation of Nations guaranteed women the sole right and power to regulate peace and war, and to select tribal leaders.

1734 — Marie-Joseph Angélique, a Montreal slave, set a fire in her master's house as she attempted to escape. The fire could not be contained and damaged half the city. She was caught, tortured, and hanged. This was the first recorded resistance by a woman to slavery, bringing attention to the conditions of slaves in Canada.

1783 — Rose Fortune, a Black woman, became the first female police officer in North America and the British Empire, working in Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia.

1840 — Mrs. Wilson Abbott, a Black woman, established the Queen Victoria Benevolent Society in

Toronto. It was the first organization to offer aid to Black women, indigents, and fugitive slaves.

1850s — Ruth Addams invented the cook stove and was the first Canadian woman to receive a patent.

1860 — The Ontario Temperance Act prohibited women from selling liquor or working in public houses.

1870 — The first Canadian Young Women's Christian Association is organized by women in Saint John, New Brunswick. The organization offered women shelter, support, education, and recreation.

1872 — The Married Women's Property Act was passed in the Ontario legislature. This gave married women the right to their own earnings, independent of the control of their husbands.

1875 — The first bachelor's degree awarded to a woman in the British Empire, a BSc in science and English literature, was given to Grace Annie Lockhart at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick. Also, Jennie Trout was the first Canadian woman licensed to practice medicine in Canada. She graduated from the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania, as she was not allowed to enroll in a Canadian medical school.

1883 — The Canadian Women's Suffrage Association was founded by Emily Howard Stowe and Augusta Stowe-Gullen. As well, the Ontario Medical College for

Women was established.

1893 — The National Council of Women of Canada was established by Lady Aberdeen, the wife of the governor-general of Canada.

1897 — Clara Brett Martin was the first woman in the British Empire to earn a law degree and to practice law.

1901 — Mary Matilda Winslow became the first Black woman to enter the University of New Brunswick. She graduated with honours and won the Montgomery-Campbell prize.

1911 — Women made up 21.6 per cent of Canadian workers - primarily employed in manufacturing, clothing industries, and domestic service.

1914 — Nellie McClung and the Political Equality League staged a "Women's Parliament" in a Winnipeg theatre to raise money for the suffrage campaign.

1916 — Women 21 and over got the vote in provincial elections in Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan.

1917 — Women 21 and over got the vote in provincial elections in British Columbia and Ontario.

1918 — Women 21 and over got the right to vote in Canadian federal elections and in Nova Scotia provincial elections.

1919 — Women 21 and over got the right to vote in provincial elections in New Brunswick.