

Ovarian Cancer in Florida: Research and Awareness

The Bankhead-Coley Cancer Research Program represents the state's focused efforts to accelerate cutting-edge cancer research in Florida. One of eleven types of cancer studied by Program researchers is ovarian cancer.

Advocacy efforts for this disease are increasing, and every September marks a nationwide observance of National Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month. Both survivors and families are working hard to raise disease awareness, and advocacy groups are wearing teal—from bracelets to ribbons—to increase support for research.

Traditionally known as the “silent killer,” ovarian cancer symptoms are vague, difficult to detect, and rarely revealed in the early, most curable stages of the disease. There is no screening test for ovarian cancer, like a Pap smear or mammogram, and ovarian cancer is resistant to current treatments (University of Michigan's website, *The University Record Online*). It may respond to chemotherapy initially, but when it recurs, which it frequently does, the cells will no longer be killed by the drug. Approximately 21,500 women nationwide will be diagnosed with ovarian cancer this year, and 50 percent will die within five years.

(<http://www.ovariancancerawareness.org/home.aspx>) According to the National Cancer Institute (NCI), out of 1510 cases of ovarian cancer diagnosed yearly in Florida between 2001-2005, 982 or 65 percent, resulted in death each year.

Floridians Affected by Ovarian Cancer

The following stories were shared with the hope that others would be helped by the telling. Clinical trials and research breakthroughs are perhaps most highly prized by people like the ones featured here—touched intimately by cancer.

“My family and friends were there every step of the way. Cancer is not an individual disease. Every single person who knew me was affected.” Janice Petrelli, Cancer Survivor

For Florida resident Janice Petrelli, cancer struck in the prime of life. In Feb. 2007, a routine gynecological exam revealed a mass over an ovary. She had no symptoms. By the time of her May surgery, her doctor discovered a tumor embedded in the rectal wall. After a gamut of tests, she was diagnosed a few weeks later with Stage III peritoneal carcinoma. She had just turned 31.

After surgery to remove a baseball-sized tumor, Janice started 18 weeks of tortuous chemotherapy. “I lost my hair and was sick as a dog. By the sixth session, I could barely lift my head off the pillow. . . . I was a runner and owned my own business. I lost a lot of work because I could not travel. It was completely debilitating with terrible nausea, nonfunctioning taste buds, and constant heartburn.”

In May of 2008, Janice's cancer reoccurred. Within seven weeks, she had two major surgeries followed by six months of maintenance chemotherapy. At this point, further chemotherapy and radiation are not options should the cancer recur.

One does not survive such an ordeal unchanged. Today, Janice's goal is to live every day to its fullest, appreciate what she has, and try to help as many people as possible along the way.

"I am very involved with the American Cancer Society. A woman I met, a breast cancer survivor, and I co-founded a group called "Healing Hands," targeted for cancer victims under 45. I am writing a book, counseling cancer patients, and speaking at medical meetings and cancer-related events. I feel God put me in this position for a reason. If I can help even one person get through their ordeal, I know what I went through was worth it."

Ms. Petrelli, an event planner, is putting her career skills to work as well. She is organizing a fundraising gala in Jacksonville in September 2010, which is Ovarian Cancer Month.

"You hear the word *cancer* and automatically assume it's a death sentence. I try to comfort people by not letting the disease consume their lives and teach them to focus on other things. My goal is to make sure they do not give up or have a pity party; maintaining a positive attitude is more than half the battle. I want to share my story with others and focus my energies on helping others. There's so much work to be done in this area . . ."

"Life is short..." Norm Demers, Husband of Susan Demers, Cancer Victim

On July 7, 2009 in Jacksonville, Norm and his family witnessed the end of his wife's eight-year struggle with ovarian cancer. Susan battled this particularly aggressive cancer, which is rarely detected in its early stages, longer than most women do.

Norm is, of course, forever changed by his wife's cancer and the way she squared off for the fight. "She fought it with everything she had. She was a strong advocate too and did not want to focus on herself. She would not let the cancer be a deterrent in fighting for this cause. She received the "Courage Award" from the American Cancer Society for her fight to promote and support cancer awareness. She still didn't feel like she'd done enough to tell people about cancer."

"To watch the deterioration of someone you love is super, super hard . . . I have three sons, and it was so hard on the family because we didn't know where to turn. . . . Husbands and families are not educated about this. . . . It seems to me, there should have been a cure found before now. Maybe I'm wrong in feeling that way, but this cancer is such a hard thing on the family."

"I went to some cancer group meetings with my wife, and doctors would talk about examinations and explain what was going wrong. I learned that if pelvic examinations are not deep enough, it's easy to miss ovarian cancer. Doctors need to be trained in thorough methods for yearly exams."

A retired police officer, Norm says, "I'm trying to help raise awareness by learning about this cancer myself and educating others. The more education we get, the better we can help other people. To be an advocate, you've got to know about it. I don't think you can ever learn enough . . ."

"Research is the only answer. And how do we help? The cancer survivors and family members can tell you what we observed in watching our loved ones fight. There's other kinds of research that needs to be done too, like how can we as men help women?"

Today his goal is to help people. "I want to continue to encourage men to go to support group meetings to learn how we can help the women we love cope."

"This is a tough disease. I just wish we could make it easier on women. I plan on going to hospice to work as a volunteer. Maybe I can help. . . . Life is short."

"I have learned more about life, joy, and hope from the women in my group than anywhere..." Kathy McLean, Cancer Support Group Leader

When Kathy McLean received her hospital chaplain's assignment in a Florida Women's Oncology unit, little did she realize how much it would change her life. Her role included leading a women's cancer support group. When this aspect of her job was no longer a paid position, she chose to continue as the group's facilitator.

"Leading the group is a privilege for me. I have learned more about life, joy, and hope from these women than anywhere. They have gifted me with allowing me to be a companion on the cancer journey with them."

Kathy's response to the women she sees weekly is to listen and learn from people facing the battle of their lives.

"One of the major frustrations I hear from these women is the lack of early, effective diagnostic tools-especially for ovarian cancer. Every woman I know with this disease was diagnosed at Stage III or IV, except for one. She was diagnosed at Stage 1, and it was a fluke. The symptoms are vague and varied, and it is very difficult for physicians to notice it. . . . One diagnostic tool that could help, a PET scan, often requires a battle with insurance companies for authorization. By the time the PET scan is approved, the cancer has metastasized even more."

"What we try to do is educate women about the symptoms of ovarian cancer. One group member, a jeweler, taught us how to make teal [the color symbolizing ovarian cancer] crystal bracelets. We call our bracelets 'Debbie's Hope.' When we sell them, we include information about ovarian cancer symptoms with the bracelet."

Equal to their passion for educating others, group members want to be on the cutting edge of treatment. “At least half of our group has done an experimental treatment. They are always looking for clinical trials and educate others about how to find them.”

“Even though they face a tough battle, the women in my group have each other. There seems to be a lack of availability for men’s cancer support groups, and their sense of isolation seems to be even greater. I see a need there.”

“The last six months have been very painful for our group; we’ve lost three long-time survivors. However, we write down their stories and read them. We want to remember them...”

Research Highlights

Since 2007, the Bankhead Coley Cancer Research Biomedical Program has funded five ovarian cancer projects. Highlights from a few of them are featured below.

Dr. Wenlong Bai, University of South Florida, 2006 Bridge Grant, is studying an active form of Vitamin D, which has been shown to suppress the cell growth of many human cancers. Ovarian cancer, however, does not respond to this treatment. Dr. Bai is studying the underlying reasons for its resistance with the purpose of developing more effective therapies to treat this disease. *Dr. Bai has completed his Bankhead-Coley Program grant and received a 5-year \$1.2 million R01 grant from the NCI to continue this study.*

Dr. Chun-Min Lo, University of South Florida, 2006 Bridge Grant, has completed his grant to study a molecule to decrease ovarian cancer cell growth, scattering, and invasion. This project employed an innovative new cell-based biosensor (Electric Cell-Substrate Impedance Sensing or ECIS) to monitor cellular changes. Dr. Lo received \$145,000 from the National Cancer Institute to continue this work.

Dr. Susan Blaydes Ingersoll, Florida Hospital Cancer Institute, 2009 New Investigator Research Grant, is investigating cellular therapy in combination with cytokines (signaling proteins) to treat ovarian cancer. Her lab has already shown that when specific cytokines are combined with cells from the immune system, up to 70 percent killing of the tumor cells occurs. Her laboratory is using ovarian cancer cells from patients to test which combinations of cytokines and immune cells have the greatest impact on tumor cells. Next, they will test which tumor types respond best to treatment. Finally, they plan to test the cytokine-immune cell combinations in a mouse model to determine which combination(s) have the greatest effect. These studies will lead to a better understanding of this complex disease and may open avenues for new treatments for ovarian cancer patients.

For more information on cervical cancer, visit <http://www.doh.state.fl.us/Family/bcc/index.html>.