

Breaking ovarian cancer's silence

By Robyn Repya

Southwest women fight back against a rarely mentioned disease

Tangletown resident Chris Wick is a happy mother of a 2-year-old son and a former marriage counselor. "I'm healthy," she said with a glow, sitting at Betsy's Back Porch, 5447 Nicollet Ave.

That statement is particularly gratifying for the 34-year-old Wick, who spent the last year fighting ovarian cancer. It's a disease that she - like many other women - knew very little about until she was diagnosed. "I didn't know anything about ovarian cancer; it's not as prevalent as breast cancer," she said.

Wick's symptoms started on Sept. 17, 2004. "I had an acute [abdominal] pain. I thought it was appendicitis. It wouldn't go away. Cancer never occurred to me."

On Nov. 30, 2004, after numerous tests and a surgery to remove what doctors thought was a cyst, Wick was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Her difficult treatment included a hysterectomy and six rounds of chemotherapy.



Photo by Rich Ryan

Tangletown mom and ovarian cancer survivor Chris Wick, 34.

She said being a new mom to son Jasper while fighting cancer has been "extremely difficult."

But now, after a year of struggle, Wick happily proclaims, "The cancer's gone."

By speaking out, she's doing her part to fight ignorance about the disease, noting that none of her friends knew anything about the disease, either.

Fueling the effort is the Minnesota Ovarian Cancer Alliance (MOCA), a nonprofit made up of Southwest women.

About ovarian cancer

According to MOCA, ovarian cancer is the fifth-leading cause of death by cancer in American women. The American Cancer Society projects that 22,240 women will be diagnosed with the disease this year and 16,000 will die from it.

Women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer in stages from one to four; one is the earliest stage; four is the most serious.

Nearly 70 percent of women are diagnosed in the disease's advanced stages, MOCA statistics say. The symptoms for ovarian cancer can be vague and sometimes written off as minor - for example, as indigestion.

MOCA Executive Director Kathleen Gavin, a Fulton resident, said diagnosis is difficult because the symptoms are often mistaken for gastrointestinal, digestive problems. (See sidebar on page 27 for a symptom list.)

There is information about disease risk factors. Women are at higher risk if they haven't given birth to a child. While women can get ovarian cancer at any age, those between 55 and 65 are the likeliest to get be diagnosed with the disease.

According to MOCA, there is a small correlation between ovarian cancer and family history - 5-10 percent of women who have it have other women in their families with ovarian, breast or colon cancer in their families.

Risk reducers include oral contraceptives, pregnancy/breastfeeding, hysterectomy, ovary removal or a tubal ligation. While tests such as a pap smear can help detect other forms of cancer, for ovarian cancer, MOCA encourages vaginal and rectal exams, transvaginal ultrasounds and a blood test called CA125.

Gavin said that the treatment for the disease is tough and not always successful. She said that if the cancer reoccurs after the initial treatment, it reoccurs often.

According to MOCA statistics, if detected early, more than 90 percent of women will survive longer than five years. However, 70 percent are diagnosed in advanced stages and their five-year survival rate is 25 percent.

Struggling with ovarian cancer

The reoccurrence is something with which Linden Hills resident Deborah Daehlin, 48, is intimately familiar. She was diagnosed with ovarian cancer on Sept. 20, 2001, just a little more than a week after the terrorist tragedies of 9-11.

A birthing nurse by trade, Daehlin's medical training didn't prevent her from writing off her symptoms - indigestion and bowel changes - to stress. "I really didn't put all that together," she said.

While Daehlin has a very positive and hopeful presence, her cancer reoccurred in nine months and she is still undergoing treatment. She's on chemo - which she takes daily as a pill, with an intravenous treatment every two weeks. The daily treatments reduce side effects such as hair loss and white-blood cell depletion, Daehlin said. She can work occasionally despite fatigue, although she is no longer in the birthing ward.

Daehlin said she tolerates the treatment well, but her body builds resistance to different chemos. "There are limited numbers of chemos to try, and I've had like 11 now," Daehlin said.

Despite acknowledging that "once you have a reoccurrence, it's very hard to cure [the cancer]," she follows drug-company and university drug trials and has even traveled numerous times to Germany for treatment not available in the U.S.

She said she also has found it extremely helpful to have a close relationship with her doctor. Daehlin recommends everyone find a doctor they “click with” because they will be like partners in the treatment.

Daehlin's positive attitude shines through, and she said she finds lessons in the life event. “I believe in making my own way in the world and not asking for help,” she said. “I learned to be gracious in accepting help, and that's one great gift the cancer has given to me.”

Like Daehlin, Wick said she struggled while fighting cancer. She said she was planning to have more children, but cancer has now made it difficult. Being sick as a new mom was also hard but an incentive. Of her son, she says, “He was really the driving force in my recovery.”

While the cancer taxed Wick physically and emotionally, like Daehlin, she too found that the experience changed her perspective on life for the better. “I didn't have any regrets,” she said of her realization in the face of illness.

Support women fighting the disease

Wick and Daehlin said one thing that's made an extraordinary difference to them in their battle against ovarian is the support from family and friends and the ability to do things to try and make a difference.

Daehlin said her husband has gone above and beyond what some might due to help, and she cites instances wherein her friends, neighbors and even her family in Arizona have rallied around her.

Wick said friends and family have also been huge morale boosters in her fight. “I had really great friends that sat through chemo with me - my husband and my mom,” she said, adding that friends also helped raise lots of money for the cause through an ovarian cancer run/walk benefit.

Another anchor of support for many women with ovarian cancer is MOCA, now with more than 2,000 members and more than 500 survivors. A group of ovarian cancer survivors started the group in 1999 over dinner, when they discussed the lack of awareness and the need to do something about it.

From a St. Louis Park office, the women of MOCA focus on education, fund-raising, and support for those with ovarian cancer and have raised more than \$1 million dollars for ovarian cancer research throughout the past five years.

Wick and Daehlin have been involved with the MOCA organization, whether it's a support group or helping to put together gift bags for events.

Wick and Daehlin said they're glad to have the opportunity to talk about ovarian cancer in the hopes that it might help educate women to recognize the symptom and raise awareness about the disease. “I really want people to know there's hope,” Daehlin said.

Want to know more about ovarian cancer or MOCA? Visit www.mnovarian.org.