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Lifesaving lectures on ovarian cancer

At age 31, Sarah Noonan, a physical therapist from Chaska, made an appointment with her doctor to find out why she hadn't gotten pregnant after nine months of trying.

Weeks later, she was recovering from a full hysterectomy and beginning the first of six rounds of chemotherapy.

Her diagnosis: ovarian cancer.

Her prognosis: very, very hopeful.

"I was diagnosed at an early stage, and I had great medical care, and, fortunately for me, I'm healthy," says Noonan, who has been cancer-free for three years.

Now, to help other women get the same good chances for survival, Noonan tells her story every six weeks at the University of Minnesota to the third- and fourth-year medical students on their first day of an OB/GYN rotation.

"The whole point is to get the disease on their radar so they know what to look for, so they know the symptoms, so they realize it can happen to women of any age," she says.

That is also the goal of the Minnesota Ovarian Cancer Alliance's annual Silent No More walk and run scheduled for Saturday at Rosland Park in Edina. MOCA's biggest fundraiser, the event brings in an estimated \$200,000 for research, support for survivors and educational outreach.

Though MOCA has awarded more than \$1.3 million for ovarian cancer research in Minnesota since 2000, an equally important aspect of its work is simply making more patients and health care providers aware of the disease, which occurs in one of every 57 women, of any age.

The symptoms — which include bloating, an increased waistline, menstrual pain and fatigue — often can be subtle and easy to dismiss as the usual complaints of being female. This may explain why most ovarian cancer patients aren't diagnosed until the cancer has progressed, and when their chance of survival for five years is only 20 percent. It may also explain why ovarian cancer survivors can be particularly effective at teaching medical students what they should look for.

One of the best local educators on this front was an Eden Prairie woman named Raine Snyder, whom I introduced to you in this column the week she passed away in May. For five years, her symptoms — abdominal pain, severe diarrhea and shortness of breath — were misdiagnosed as Crohn's disease. Only after years of ineffective treatment did she finally receive a CA-125 blood test, a tumor marker for ovarian cancer. A normal reading is between zero and 30. Hers was 443.

Committed to making sure this mistake wouldn't be repeated, Snyder regularly shared her case history with the University of Minnesota medical students even in her final weeks of life, aided by an oxygen tank. Sarah Noonan, who often shared the stage with her, says their firsthand lessons have helped get the attention of medical students, who may help raise the survival rate for another generation of women.

"Partly, it's a way to make sense of the whole experience and to give something back," says Noonan. "Medical students are so inundated with technical information that this is a way to put a real face on the disease."

Many more hopeful faces can be seen at 8:30 a.m. Saturday. That's when Minnesota's more than 150 ovarian cancer survivors gather at the race for their annual group picture.

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If you go

What: Minnesota Ovarian Cancer Alliance's Silent No More walk/run

When: Saturday. Registration begins at 7:30 a.m., 5K run starts at 9 a.m. and the 2K walk at 9:30 a.m.

Where: Rosland Park in Edina (about one-half mile west of France Avenue South on 66th Street at Minnesota 62 and Valley View Road)

More information: www.mnovarian.org or 952-890-8775