

Breast Cancer Survivor Recalls Chemotherapy Session on New Year's Eve



Rutgers professor Dr. Barbara O'Neill makes her living explaining personal finance to college students. She teaches classes at Rutgers, travels the state offering seminars to professionals, writes columns for the newspaper, and is often seen on television. When she was diagnosed with breast cancer 15 years ago, Barbara approached the situation

with her usual pragmatism. "First, there was sheer panic," she recalls. Then she switched on her computer and scoured the internet. "You reach out to others to get help and information, and you try to get empowered and learn all the terms and understand the stages." Barbara was 46 years old when she was diagnosed. She had been diligent about getting annual mammograms, but dense breast tissue had caused this particular tumor to go undetected. Barbara found it herself and immediately sought medical attention. Additional testing and a biopsy confirmed that Barbara had Stage 2 breast cancer.

Breast cancer strikes more than 211,000 women each year, and in 2009, the year that the most recent statistics are available, more than 40,000 women died as a result. Breast cancer is often a silent disease, with virtually no symptoms, but it is often completely curable if diagnosed in its early stages. The majority of those diagnosed with breast cancer each year have no family history of the disease, making it all the more important for women to get an annual mammogram. According to data compiled recently by the Komen for the Cure® North Jersey Affiliate, almost 33% of women over the age of 40 who reside in Sussex County have not had a mammogram in the past year, a percentage which is marginally better than some of the other counties in the agency's 9-county service area in northern New Jersey. However, Sussex County has the highest incidence of incurable breast cancer in the state, primarily because the cancer is not being detected at its earliest, most curable, stage. The average 5-year mortality rate across all ethnic groups in Sussex County is 33.4%, almost 7 percentage points higher than the 9-county average of 26.5%.

Early detection is essential in the fight against breast cancer; the survival rate for women who detected breast cancer in its earliest stages has reached 98%. A mammogram is 85% - 90% effective at detecting breast cancer. Mammograms may detect breast cancer up to two years before they can be felt through clinical or self-examinations. Recent studies have shown that mammography can reduce the chances of death from breast cancer by 30%. Early diagnosis is the key to a cure, and urging women to get a mammogram can be the difference between life and death.

Immediately following her diagnosis, Barbara had surgery to remove the tumor as well as 20 lymph nodes. She scheduled her first chemotherapy session for New Year's Eve, 1999. "I fully expected to be barfing in a Y2K shelter on New Year's Eve," she laughs. However, the anti-nausea

medication she was given did the trick. "I never did get sick."

Barbara endured eight rounds of chemotherapy followed by radiation treatments. She lost her hair, but bought four different wigs. Her husband playfully named all of the wigs and made a game out of bidding each one good night every evening. "Losing my hair wasn't the worst thing. The thing that bothered me the most was the cost of the prescriptions." She recalls one drug in particular which would have cost her \$1,800 per dose if she had not been insured. "I work in personal finance. That experience sensitized me more than ever to healthcare costs."

Barbara has been cancer free for 15 years but she still encounters side effects of the disease. Recently, she underwent treatment for lymphedema, a condition which caused swelling and aching in the arm under which her lymph nodes were removed all of those years ago. Part of her treatment is sporting a compression sleeve. "Trying to find the places that sell these sleeves is a nightmare. I ordered one in purple, and my husband named it 'Barney!'"

Barbara continues to recommend mammograms along with other forms of detection in the fight against breast cancer. "At Rutgers we have a process called 'Triangulation,' where we use multiple methods to evaluate the effectiveness of programs. I believe that you should do everything. Don't rely on mammograms alone. Do breast self-exams and see your doctor, so you're not counting on just one thing."

Free mammograms will be offered to underinsured and uninsured women over the age of 40 on Thursday, March 27th, from 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. at Project Self-Sufficiency, thanks to the support of the Susan G. Komen for the Cure North Jersey®. To conduct the tests, two technicians with a state-of-the-art mammography machine set up shop at the agency's Community Education Center. Women are examined discreetly and their test results are made available within days. In the past few years, hundreds of women have received free mammograms through the program at Project Self-Sufficiency.

Women who are interested in receiving a free mammogram are encouraged to call the agency at 973-940-3500 to make an appointment. Free mammograms and pap tests are also available through the New Jersey Cancer Education and Early Detection (NJCEED) program administered by the Sussex County Health Department. Follow-up diagnostics, including additional mammography views, breast ultrasounds, and biopsies are available to women who are screened at Project Self-Sufficiency. Interested participants are encouraged to call 973-579-0750, ext. 1246. In addition, Newton Medical Center will provide a free mammogram for women who qualify through the Newton Medical Center Foundation's "Mammograms Save Lives" program. Those without health insurance are encouraged to contact Newton Medical Center's Education/Outreach office at 973-579-8340 for more information.

