



# The Engaged Patient

## Toward Patient-Physician Partnerships for Better Outcomes

BY PEG FORD

**As a cancer survivor** and patient advocate, I have focused my efforts on promoting projects that encourage patients and physicians to work in partnership toward better outcomes. My journey started in early 2007 after I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. As there is no screening test for early detection, a dismal five-year survival rate of only 45% for late-stage disease, and, unfortunately, as most women will face recurrences, I felt compelled to get involved.

The internet proved invaluable in the beginning. I discovered a pioneering program of the Ovarian Cancer National Alliance — Survivors Teaching Students — designed to increase ovarian cancer symptom and risk factor awareness among medical students. Working with a local physician, I launched the first presentation to third-year medical students at UC San Diego in late 2008. Since then, once every six weeks on the students' OB/

GYN rotation, a team of ovarian cancer survivors shares their personal stories, how they were diagnosed, what happened, and where they are now in treatment. As one student commented afterward, “It put a very personal and human view on something always presented as statistics and facts.”

From there, identifying a need to reach physicians out of medical school for several years, I approached Afshin Bahador, MD, gynecologic oncologist, and asked to participate in his grand rounds. Our collaboration proved highly successful in several Scripps and Sharp hospitals around the county. Dr. Bahador commented, “This opportunity afforded me the experience to see ovarian cancer patients actively involved in bringing awareness of this deadly disease to my colleagues. As survivors, they not only placed a face on this disease, but they dispelled the widely held belief that ovarian

cancer is the ‘silent killer.’”

Realizing the benefit of broadening our efforts, I expanded the program to 10 nursing schools, with the personal goal of not having one nurse practitioner graduate in the county who has not attended one of our presentations. According to a City College associate dean and director, “It was wonderful having all 120 of our students in the same room so engaged and so inspired in just one hour’s time!”

Another novel physician-patient partnership program was developed by the Sharp Chula Vista Medical Center Pathology Department in conjunction with the Medical Center’s oncologists and the Breast Cancer Patient Navigator Program. This program was designed to assist breast cancer patients by educating them to be better prepared to ask informed questions about their diagnosis and treatment options. Patients attend a “Meet the Pathologist” session where the physician gives an overview of the anatomy and pathology of the breast, with each patient receiving a copy of their pathology report.

Additional projects outside San Diego County include Decision Services, a UCSF pilot program designed with specially trained interns specifically for the newly diagnosed cancer patient, and Open to Options, launched by the Cancer Support Community to reach a greater number of patients through its network of 150 locations across the country.

I am grateful to those progressive-thinking physicians who are actively supporting the movement toward a new era of physician-patient partnerships. We have demonstrated the value of collaborative efforts and the importance of reaching out to survivors so that they can confidently take an active role in their treatments. I envision the examples above to be only the tip of the iceberg of possibilities, and I call on our healthcare community to continue developing physician-patient partnerships in order to positively impact both our communities.

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