

*Client: Sparrow Magazine
Sparrow Health System*

A Second, Third and Fourth Opinion

by Karel Juhl

The lump in Leslie Algren's breast was old news. It was discovered 22 years earlier by a flight surgeon while Algren was on flight status for the Army. "After six months of pure hell they finally told me 'no problem,' that is was fibrocystic."

Still, she kept a close eye on that spot, religiously performing a breast self-exam each month. Then, in 1997, she thought she detected a change. Was it growing, or was it her imagination?

"It's like watching a tree grow," she says. "You just don't notice until all of the sudden it's unmistakably bigger." Algren immediately contacted her doctor, and tests soon confirmed the cyst that had been with her half her life had indeed turned deadly: Stage III carcinoma, with lymph node involvement.

She opted for a mastectomy instead of the less radical lumpectomy. Then, days before her surgery, her surgeon recommended she visit the Breast Cancer Center at Sparrow

Hospital. He also suggested she consider chemotherapy before surgery, to shrink the tumor.

"I thought the man was nuts to suggest I might keep cancer in my body for seven months to do chemotherapy first," she recalls. "Only because he thought so much of Sparrow's clinic did I go, but I was totally convinced there was no way I was having chemo first."

Choices

Sparrow's Breast Cancer Center is not really a place, but more a gathering of specialists at Sparrow's Regional Cancer Center. Only two women are seen during each free, four hour clinic, and a physician referral is not needed.

"The Center serves as a resource for women who are newly diagnosed with cancer," says Sherolyn Gonzalez, the Center's coordinator. "Our purpose is to help women learn about the disease and the choices they have for treatment." Gonzalez, a nurse clinician, is a nationally recognized expert on breast cancer.

Patients first meet with a nurse specialist and then view a slide presentation about breast cancer and various treatment options. Next the patient individually sees specialists, including the nurse clinician, a medical oncologist, a radiation oncologist, a surgeon and a social worker. Together they assess the patient's physical, emotional and social condition.

"During lunch the patient and her spouse or support person go out to eat, while the Breast Cancer Center team brown bags it," Gonzalez says. "We have a working lunch. The team takes all the information and discusses all the different treatment options, and formulates a recommendation."

"The advantage to this approach is that all the experts meet at the same time and brainstorm the best treatment approach," says Dr. Syamala Ahmad, Sparrow radiation oncologist. "When the patient returns from lunch, she will meet with one of the team members, who will discuss our recommendation."

"They swayed me"

The recommendation for Leslie no-way-am-I-having-chemo-first Algren was chemo first. "By the time I left the Breast Cancer Center I was probably 95 percent assured in my own mind that that was exactly what I was going to do," she says. "They did such a good job of presenting. I'm a stubborn person; they swayed me and I'm so grateful."

Armed with information -- from her assessment, the Center's resource library, the American Cancer Society, the Internet and friends -- Algren made her choice, and began chemotherapy. She also participated in a clinical trial for a promising new treatment.

Chemotherapy significantly reduced the size of Algren's tumor, and was followed by surgery -- a lumpectomy -- and then radiation. One year to the day from her diagnosis, Algren's cancer was in remission. She remains in good health today, and now devotes much of her time to helping other women who are battling the disease.

"I'm pleased to tell people I came through Sparrow's Breast Cancer Center," she says. "Just think: In the span of four hours I got my second, third and fourth opinions. Everything was so well organized, but it wasn't sterile. There you are a bonafide person, and everything was presented in a very caring way.

"A lot of things happened to get me where I am today, and I think I'm in better shape than I would have been if I hadn't gone to the Breast Cancer Center. I want people to understand that breast cancer is a disease that is survivable."

The Sparrow Breast Cancer Center is offered free of charge to women newly diagnosed with breast cancer. You do not need a physician's referral to participate, nor do you need to be a Sparrow patient. The four hour clinic is held on Thursdays. For more information, call the Center at (517) 483-2689.

Sidebar to breast cancer article: 580 words

A Time to Heal

What do you do when the medical community tells you you're cured, but you know you're not yet well?

"When I was done with my medical treatment, my surgery and radiation, there was no sign or symptom of disease," says breast cancer survivor Denise Green. "In that respect I was cured, but I sure knew I was not healed."

As a nurse and the director of Sparrow Women's Services, Denise Green is intimately familiar with the world of modern medicine. That world subscribes to the "medical model," the diagnosis and treatment of disease, and focuses on the cure, which is the absence of signs and symptoms of disease.

"To me, healing is a sense of harmony and balance, of getting things back into a sense of order," Green says. "I certainly was not feeling that wholeness, that harmony of balance. Healing and curing are complementary; you need both. As I looked around, I wondered what I could do to help myself. What was there besides the medical treatment I'd had?"

Her search led her to Creative Wellness and a nurse who talked with her about the various ways she could help herself heal. Among them: proper nutrition, exercise and

meditation. They also talked about what in Green's life was energy-giving, and what was energy-depleting.

Women in particular have a tendency to give of themselves, but not take the time to replenish their own energy stores. "That, in essence, was my lesson in all of this," Green says. "Creating a balance between giving my energy out, taking in what I needed for my own re-energy, and realizing that all of that power is within me for my own healing. It's always in my control."

This is an oversimplification of what, for Green, has been a three year journey she's not yet completed. During that time she has almost made a second career of studying and learning more about ways we can help ourselves to heal.

"The medical staff is made up of experts who focus on curing the disease," she says, "but another important aspect is to find experts who focus on healing the patient."

To that end, Green is working with the Sparrow Center for Health, Humanities and Well Being to create a more healing environment and to bring healing into the medical model. She's been involved with the creation of a healing garden and labyrinth within the Sparrow Professional Building.

"Healing comes from within the person, and if people realize the tremendous power within themselves, it is very comforting," Green says. "Often, when we are in

crisis, we need some direction, and that's where health care providers can be helpful. We're like midwives in that process.

"What's important in healing is living in the moment. That's very difficult to do when your mind is rushing ahead to what you need to do next," she continued. "When you have an illness, it brings you right into the present moment. What happened in the past doesn't seem of big importance, and you don't know what the future holds. Accept it as the gift it is. Let it bring you into the present where you can make decisions, look at what your life is about, and decide how to make the best of the time you have. The only thing we really have is this moment."

The Center for Health, Humanities and Well Being is located in Suite 111 of the Sparrow Professional Building. For information, contact Denise Green at (517) 483-2989.