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Petrolia Vows to Fight Disease to Bitter End

Posted By David Pattenaude, Sarnia Observer, Sun Media, April 1, 2009

Given 12 months to live after being diagnosed with multiple myeloma, Petrolia's Carol Morwood decided to fight and is now on a campaign to increase public awareness about the incurable blood disease.

She's also urging everyone to seek medical help if they suspect their immune system has been compromised seriously.

"Don't fool around. Get to the bottom of whatever it is and get checked out," said Morwood, who said she wouldn't have survived without fast treatment.

She had a stem cell transplant last year and is now in remission.

Morwood, 62, is collecting pledges for the Cancer Society's Relay for Life fundraiser being held at Sarnia's Canatara Park on June 19. She will be a participant in the relay.

"If you don't decide to take care of yourself, nobody else will," she said. "You can go in a corner and cry and it'll help for a minute or so, but it doesn't help you deal with the situation. I've decided to fight this disease to the bitter end."

While treatable, there is no cure for multiple myeloma, a progressive cancer of the blood plasma cell. No cause for the disease has been identified.

Before Cancer Month in April, and as one of some 6,000 Canadians living with multiple myeloma, Morwood is sharing her story to raise awareness about this rare type of cancer, which is the second most prevalent blood cancer after non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. An estimated 2,100 new cases of the disease will be diagnosed in Canada this year.

A former hairdresser, Morwood had never heard of multiple myeloma until she was diagnosed with an advanced form of the cancer after having X-rays done after wrenching her shoulder. She had no family history of cancer and didn't feel sick.

"I'm now in remission, but not everyone with this disease is so lucky," said Morwood. "There are only a limited number of treatments for multiple myeloma and not all patients respond to them in the same way. That's what makes it really important for patients to have access to new treatments."

A new drug approved by Health Canada in October for safety and effectiveness can help patients with multiple myeloma live longer. The drug is called Revlimid but it's expensive and funding approval

has not been given in any province. That means people using the drug pay for it out of their own pocket.

"You think our health care system is free but it's not; and it can be a rude awakening," said Morwood.

She is circulating a petition in local stores to have the drug covered by OHIP. The petition will be given to Sarnia-Lambton MPP Bob Bailey for presentation at the Ontario legislature at Queen's Park in Toronto.

"Revlimid must be accessible through public funding to patients and health care providers. This new oral treatment is giving hope to Canadians diagnosed with this life-threatening cancer," said Morwood.

In the meantime, she is helping promote Myeloma Canada's national 'Time to Live' public awareness campaign.

While Morwood feels like one of the "lucky ones" who is still alive after a multiple myeloma diagnosis, she said her bones have been weakened by the disease and she is taking a drug -- by injection once a month -- to rebuild the strength in her bones.

New treatments for multiple myeloma are giving people diagnosed with the disease up to 10 or more years of life.

In most cases, people who develop multiple myeloma have no clear risk factors.

But people in agricultural occupations, petroleum workers, workers in leather industries, and cosmetologists all seem to have a higher-than-average chance of developing multiple myeloma, according to research. Exposure to herbicides, insecticides, petroleum products, heavy metals, plastics and various dusts including asbestos also appear to be risk factors for the disease.

The Petrolia Topic