

Advocates of Hope

Raising Cancer Awareness in the Business Community

Early Detection Can Lead to a Cure

BY KATIE GRASSO

Detecting cancer early can be a lifesaver. Just ask Lois Wilkinson. Five years ago, Wilkinson forgot about her yearly mammogram when she went on vacation and missed her appointment. When she went to reschedule, the only available appointments were months away. So when she saw the Delaware Breast Cancer Coalition's mammogram van parked outside of a Women's Health Expo she was attending at the Sheraton Dover Hotel, Wilkinson took the opportunity to get screened.

"I went in the van and was very impressed," recalls Wilkinson. "It was clean, sterile, and just as nice as the facility I had gone to before. I said, 'ok, let's go ahead and do it.' Three days later I got the call from my doctor."

Wilkinson was diagnosed with breast cancer, and by the time she would have had her mammogram at her regular facility, she was already through surgery.

Wilkinson is one of many Delawareans who have detected cancer early and increased their survival rate

due to cancer screenings. More Delawareans are seeing the importance of getting routinely screened thanks to efforts by the Division of Public Health. According to the Delaware Cancer Consortium (DCC), Delaware has gone from fourth in the nation for screening rates to

among the top two.

Early Screenings on the Rise

"The earlier we detect cancer, the higher there is of a probability of a cure," says Dr. Stephen Grubbs, Delaware Cancer Consortium advisory panel member and chair of the Early Detection and Prevention Committee.

"The purpose of early detection is to catch cancer at a stage where there is a limited amount."

The State Division of Public Health and the Delaware Cancer Consortium recommend four routine screenings: breast, prostate, colon and cervical, Grubbs says. The

DCC focused attention on colon cancer screening with impressive results after realizing that Delaware's colon cancer screening rates were low and the incidence of



The Delaware Breast Cancer Coalition's mammogram van is a "doctor's office on wheels." Sandy Joyce, a radiologic technologist certified in mammography, shows off the van. Photo by Katie Grasso

death was high. In the last several years, colonoscopy screening rates have risen from 45 percent of men and women over age 50 getting screened in 2000, to more than 70 percent getting screened in 2006, the most recent data available. "New rates of colon cancer are going down," says Grubbs. "I'm expecting to see a dramatic drop in the colon cancer death rate, as well."

The DCC is now tackling prostate and cervical cancer screenings through marketing campaigns and outreach programs in different communities throughout the state. Prostate cancer is a major disease among African American men, says Grubbs. The DCC will also try to encourage all young women to get the HPV vaccine, since HPV is the leading cause of cervical cancer.

"The HPV vaccine is a big event in the world of cancer medicine," notes Grubbs. "It's a no-brainer."

For residents who don't have health insurance or have health insurance that doesn't cover cancer screening, the state's Screening for Life program provides free screenings for breast, cervical and prostate

cancers. For more information about eligibility, call (800) 464-HELP. Cancer Screening Nurse Navigators are another resource that is available at every health system in the state, according to Grubbs. "This program is so successful that other states are looking to model after it," he notes.

Van on the Run

A 15-year breast cancer survivor, Vicky Cooke, executive director of the Delaware Breast Cancer Coalition (DBCC), says there is no excuse not to get a mammogram in Delaware. "Whatever the myth is out there that's keeping people from getting a mammogram, we'll dispel it."

The DBCC's mammogram van is a breast cancer

screening facility on wheels. While a mammogram in a traditional facility can take as long as two hours, a visit to the van generally takes only 20 minutes, says Melany Sammons, director of Women's Mobile Health Screening, LLC, a subsidiary of the Delaware Breast Cancer Coalition that manages and operates the van through a contract with the state's Screening for Life program. "I tout the van as a doctor's office on wheels. Companies love that it takes so little use of their employees' time."

The state-funded van has been in operation for more than two years and has screened approximately 1,038 women between June 2006 and June 2007. Women call

to find out when the van will be near them, set up an appointment and just bring their prescription for a mammogram with them, explains Sammons. The films are immediately taken to get viewed and patients get their results in three days.

Businesses can call to have the van come to their location, at no cost. To date Citibank, AstraZeneca, University of Delaware and

Wal-Mart have taken advantage of this service to help their employees get screened.

It's now been five years since Lois Wilkinson was diagnosed, and she has turned what she's learned from her experience into a career — she now works with the DBCC as a special projects manager.

"There was an angel on my shoulder that day," she recalls. "It was fate."

For more information on the Delaware Breast Cancer Coalition and its mammogram van, go to www.debreastcancer.org or call (888) 672-9647. For more information about the Delaware Cancer Consortium and its programs, go to www.delawarecancerconsortium.org. ■

Find a Cancer Screening Nurse Navigator Near You:

NEW CASTLE COUNTY

Christiana Care (302) 765-4501

St. Francis Hospital (302) 421-4986

KENT COUNTY

Bayhealth Medical Center (302) 430-5064

SUSSEX COUNTY

Beebe Medical Center (302) 645-3169

Nanticoke Hospital (302) 629-6611, ext. 3765