

Aberdeen American News (SD)

October 20, 2002

BEATING BREAST CANCER

Elissa Grossell, American News Writer

Lucky is not how Julie Delaney would describe herself.

If the word slips out, she'll knock on wood --- nobody that has had cancer is lucky, she says.

"I feel fortunate," she corrects herself.

Delaney, 45, of Webster is now cancer-free after being diagnosed with the disease last year. And thanks to an Aberdeen plastic surgeon who performs breast reconstructions, she has emerged from the ordeal with a new breast.

She has also come through the experience with a new outlook on life.

"The sky is bluer, the trees are brighter," Delaney said. "I try to be more positive. The little things just don't bother me."

Now, Delaney takes nothing for granted.

"Life's so short . . . Live it and don't worry about the small stuff."

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month nationwide. According to the American Cancer Society's Web site, www.cancer.org, estimates are that 192,200 women in the United States contracted invasive breast cancer in 2001, and that about 39,600 women died from the disease. Though it primarily affects women, in rare occurrences men can also get breast cancer.

Delaney, a substitute teacher at Webster High School, was diagnosed with breast cancer on Aug. 14, 2001, during her annual mammogram.

"I'm awfully thankful the radiologist had a really good day that day," she said, laughing.

Her radiologist found a stage zero tumor in her breast. This is the lowest level of cancer, but Delaney wasn't taking any chances.

She said she knew right away that she wanted her breast removed. "There was no question."

Delaney immediately went to Avera St. Luke's Hospital in Aberdeen. She first met with surgeon Dr. Jean Gerber, who set her up an appointment with an oncologist, Dr. Richard Conklin.

Conklin told her there was a new plastic surgeon in town who could perform a breast reconstruction immediately following a mastectomy.

And that's when she met Dr. Sanjay **Mukerji**.

"I trusted him the moment I saw him," Delaney said, smiling. "He's just like a Teddy bear."

Reconstruction: **Mukerji**, who opened a plastic surgery practice in Aberdeen in July 2001, is board certified as a general surgeon and plastic surgeon and performs breast reconstruction surgery. Options include skin expansion followed by the use of implants or flap reconstruction using tissue from other parts of the body.

The choice, **Mukerji** said, is with the patient. Delaney opted for the flap surgery. So on Aug. 24, 2001, skin, tissue and muscle were taken from her back and pulled forward over the breast area.

Delaney's was the first breast reconstruction surgery **Mukerji** performed in Aberdeen, though he had done some at his previous practice in Washington, D.C. It took him about three hours to perform the surgery at St. Luke's after a one-hour mastectomy there by Dr. Gerber.

And it was like Delaney had never even been without a breast. "I went in with one and came out with one."

She then had a second minor operation a few months later to create a nipple and apply tattoo pigment around it to create the areola.

Delaney praised the doctors and staff at St. Luke's.

"Everybody is so kind. Everything felt so comfortable," she said. "I trusted the doctors 100 percent."

That goes especially for Dr. **Mukerji**.

Everything just clicked with the plastic surgeon from the very beginning, she said. She didn't even ask him how many of the procedures he'd done. "Something just pushed me through it."

Mukerji, who also has outreach offices in Huron, Pierre and Watertown, has now performed 15 breast reconstructions at St. Luke's and his clinics for women ages 32 to 50.

A patient has the option of having the plastic surgery along with the mastectomy or after chemotherapy. **Mukerji** said doing it right away is the optimal situation.

Feeling normal: It's "much better for a patient's self-image" to incorporate the breast into their body image, he said.

Delaney said she couldn't imagine going back later to have the reconstruction.

"I would think, 'I've been through enough,' " she said.

The reconstruction fixes the defect or deformity caused by a mastectomy, the removal of the entire breast, or lumpectomy, the removal of a cancerous tumor from the breast, **Mukerji** said. Women are able to have a normal-looking breast.

And they have "dramatically improved" self-esteem and body image.

He stressed that this isn't a cosmetic surgery; it's "just to make them normal . . . to restore someone the way they used to be."

Delaney said it's definitely made her feel better, and more "normal."

"It's unbelievable what they can do. It's a miracle."

For the first year she could tell a difference; her reconstructed breast felt kind of puffy and hard. And because she doesn't have muscle where she used to in her back, it would sometimes ache when she would do certain things, like raking.

Now, though, her new breast feels just like the other one.

The surgeries range from \$5,000 to \$6,000, but federal law passed in 1998 mandates insurance companies to pay for breast reconstructions.

Delaney said she would've done it anyway. In fact, not having the reconstruction wasn't even an option.

"I'm too young . . . (I'm) not going to walk around with a prosthesis," she said.

Continuing to fight: The pathology report from the breast tissue that was removed showed there had also been a stage one tumor in Delaney's breast that hadn't shown up on the mammogram.

"What if they wouldn't have found the first one?" she said. "I'm just so glad I had it done."

But Delaney also had her lymph nodes removed two weeks after surgery to make sure the cancer hadn't spread to them. If the cancer would've spread there, she may have had to endure chemotherapy.

Fortunately, it hadn't. They'd gotten it all.

So she is currently cancer-free --- but she'll quickly knock on wood about that, too.

Delaney has a check-up every three months and blood work every five months. And she has to be on medication for five years. She takes an estrogen-blocker called tamoxifen. Her pastor told her to think of the pills as "soul food" every time she takes them.

Although Delaney is doing well now, that wasn't always the case. She said at first once the "roller coaster" ride stopped, she was fine. But after a few months, she said, it finally hit her.

She lost a lot of weight and got an ulcer. She also sank into a depression.

Delaney, who likes to shop, said "there was a period when I (thought), 'Why buy anything? I'm not going to be here in a year.' "

"That was kind of scary," she said. She was sick, and "I knew I needed help."

So she got it. She went to a local counselor, who told her she had clinical depression because of her trauma and who got the OK for her to take anti-depressants. She just recently stopped taking them.

"That really helped me," she said. "It seems more normal again."

Faith, family and friends: Delaney also prays a lot and says it got her through her ordeal. "People (who) say prayers don't help healing (are) crazy."

She also credits the prayers of others: "It just kind of lifted me right through it."

"I never stop praying and thanking God for (my) friends and family," she continued. "I can't imagine going through this without them."

Delaney said her husband, Kent, "was very, very supportive." Delaney used to worry about their 15-year-old daughter Rachel's future with the disease, but she said other than her case there is no history of breast cancer in her family. Her doctors told her hopefully by the time her daughter is older, there will be a cure.

That's good news, because as Delaney pointed out, breast cancer can happen to anybody.

Next stop, cured: Her advice to other women is to get mammograms. Even though mammograms skyrocketed in Webster after her illness, she said she still knows people who don't get them.

You never know what could happen, she said, and there are a lot of things out of our control.

But if there are options available to help prevent certain things, "Why not do them? "

Last October, Delaney didn't even want to think about Breast Cancer Awareness Month. But this year, pointing to her pink pin, she said she'd call herself a breast cancer awareness advocate.

But there is another title she's hesitant to give herself.

"Survivor I have a hard time with," Delaney admits.

After five years, a patient is considered cured; Delaney is just entering her second year.

"It's like when my five years are up . . . I'll feel like a survivor."

Day by day, she's getting there.

An anesthetist once told her, "You should look in the mirror and see 'cured' across your face, not 'cancer.' "

"I think of that a lot," Delaney said. "It's getting a lot easier."

Copyright (c) 2002 Aberdeen American News