

Cancer conference educates doctors and patients

Charity Prater

"I don't want you to have cancer, momma," Taryn Brendtro, 20, still remembers telling her mother, Kari Brendtro, when she was ten. Kari, now 44, first heard the word cancer at the age of 35.

Kari was sitting in bed with her two young daughters when her doctor phoned. He told Kari that she was diagnosed with cancer. Her heart sank. She thought of her two daughters. "My daughters are my best friends," Kari says. "I wouldn't want to miss their weddings or to never meet my grandchildren."

Nine years ago Kari began suffering from severe symptoms. She lay in bed 15 to 16 hours a day trapped in immense pain and horrible heartburn. She would wake up from sleep feeling as if her heart would beat its way through her chest. "I was so scared," Kari says, "I thought I was having a heart attack."

For years doctors tossed her illness back and forth, not knowing if she suffered from midlife depression, menopausal symptoms, or if the symptoms were all in her head.

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Kari Brendtro (left) has been fighting carcinoid cancer for years. Her daughter, Taryn Brendtro (right), has been with her through it all. - Photo by Charity Prater

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After years of struggling with exhaustion and frustration, Kari was finally diagnosed with carcinoid cancer of the liver.

"Knowing is better than not knowing," Kari says, "I am so happy to know that I am not crazy."

Since her diagnosis, Kari decided to become involved in her Northeast Portland community, uniting those who suffer from carcinoid cancer or know others who have. Kari's support group, for patients and their families, meets three to four times a year. "When a person gets cancer, their family gets it too," Kari says.

"Three years ago there were no support groups, now there are more than thirty," says

Monica Warner, director of development and research coordinator of the Carcinoid Cancer Foundation. According to the Foundation, carcinoid cancer and related neuroendocrine tumors are small tumors, found mostly in the gastrointestinal system, though they can be found elsewhere in the body. Since most of these tumors grow very slowly, it can take many years before they reach a noticeable size or cause symptoms.

Kari is also the executive director of the Carcinoid/Neuroendocrine Tumors Conference taking place at the Lloyd Center DoubleTree Hotel September 28-30. The purpose the conference is to educate both doctors and patients about the disease. "Carcinoid cancer is often misdiagnosed as

Crohn's disease or Irritable Bowel Syndrome," Kari says. "Patients often know more about the disease than most doctors. We want to bring awareness to the medical and patient community."

The day she was interviewed, Kari was wearing zebra-striped pants and matching earrings that are symbolic of carcinoid cancer. For Kari, and others who are familiar with this disease, zebras are a mascot. No

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two zebras have the same pattern of stripes, just as no two carcinoid patients have the same symptoms. Nationally, nearly 8,000 people are diagnosed with carcinoid cancer annually and that number is growing.

"The question is," Monica says, "How many people are not being diagnosed?"

Carcinoid cancer has no cure, and only a few costly drugs are available that treat its symptoms. However, it is possible to have carcinoid cancer and live a manageable life. "I'm bound and determined to live to see my kids married and to be a great grandmother," Kari says.

More information about the conference can be found at www.urzebra.net. For more information about the local support group, call (503) 249-5813. ★