

Holistic approach to health has helped cancer patient

By Bill Rea

Conventional medicine has its place, but there are also alternatives, and people owe it to themselves to be aware of that. The philosophy is practiced at the Naturopathic Wellness Centre in Caledon East, and Michelle Bellerose epitomizes that. The Toronto resident has been working at the clinic only a couple of weeks as an intake co-ordinator, but she hopes to advance herself. She has had some health distractions over the last several months, but naturopathic methods have been a big help. "I still have some personal development to tend to," she said, adding that has to be dealt with before she's able to treat people. Bellerose, 45, said homeopathy depends on clarity of the doctor to see the complete condition of the patient. Her problems got serious last May, when she was diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer, an especially aggressive form of the disease. At the time, she was told her prognosis was poor. She was also told at diagnosis that the cancer had spread to her lymphnodes, meaning it was Stage 4 cancer.

"There's no Stage 5," she said. "It means it's very dire."

An oncologist urged her to undergo chemotherapy, but Bellerose said she had done some studying and was aware of the profound secondary impacts of that treatment. She had also seen a friend die from the ravages of chemo. But she also knew there was a lot of evidence that this was a chance to make radical changes to her life style and work on a holistic approach, with her understanding of it.

"This was a tailor-made opportunity to put my money where my mouth was," she said, adding the quality of life while undergoing chemo was a factor too.

Bellerose said she understood it was a gamble to try these ideas that she held near and dear, and she urged people to be careful if they are thinking of doing the same thing. "I am not counselling anyone to walk away from standard care or not," she said, adding she believes it's important for people to realize they have choices.

When she was diagnosed, Bellerose said the tumour was "relatively small," and she considered the possibility of just getting a lumpectomy. Oncologists at Princess Margaret Cancer Centre, Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre and Mount Sinai Hospital all said surgery was possible, after three or four months of chemo.

"That was pretty depressing for me," she said.

Bellerose said it took a couple of months to find a surgeon in Cornwall who was willing to perform a mastectomy. He also told her there was no medical explanation for her still being alive. The tumour had grown, but had not attached itself to the chest wall.

The operation was performed in December.

Bellerose said an oncologist at Princess Margaret reported there had been no spread of the cancer. "She could offer no explanation either, except to say I had been granted a reprieve," she said.

She observed that she had been encountering doctors who weren't interested in hearing about the protocols that she had been following over the last couple of months. She stressed she was not knocking doctors, pointing out they are simply following the mind sets they've been trained to follow.

The protocols involve things like dietary changes. Bellerose pointed to the importance of research when adopting a diet, stressing that cancer patients can't follow a one-size-fits-all model.

She said she chose to follow a ketogenic diet, which eliminates carbohydrates and sugars, and replaces them with fats. Bellerose explained cancer cells lack the ability to switch from glucose to fats for energy, so cutting sugar starves cancer.

It was not just the physical issues that needed to be addressed. Bellerose said she had to take personal inventory of her life, which considered her emotional well-being and attachments to negatives from her past. Attitude is important too, she said. "What you think becomes your reality," she observed.

She added it was important that she not feel the situation was a terrible calamity.

"Things don't come into our lives that we lack the ability to cope with and turn around to some advantage," she observed. "For me, this diagnosis was a gift."

Bellerose said she had been living out of balance, and "very much created the perfect storm that made this inevitable."

Part of the problem stemmed from physical and emotional abuse she endured as a child, as well as some of her activities as an adult.

But Bellerose explained awareness of these facts doesn't mean one has to be fatalistic, or blame those responsible for abuse. They provide tools to change one's self. She said children have no defences, so they develop ingrained responses that they carry forward.

"We can let go of the person that we've become," she said.

Bellerose stressed the importance of people taking the responsibility to educate themselves about their condition and focus on the

steps they need to take. For a lot of people, she said taking responsibility is hard to face, since they have been trained to put their faith in the authority of a doctor. Being an active participant in one's own care has an impressive success rate, she said, although she added it's important to know when to consult someone who knows what they're doing. One of the keys is for people to keep looking for someone willing to work with them, in accordance with their values and wishes.

?You have to be prepared for a certain journey,? she said. ?It's going to have it's ups and downs.?

Exercise is important too, because she said cancer hates it. ?Exercise oxygenates the blood,? she said, adding it also improves stamina and attitude.

Spiritual relationships come into play as well. Bellerose said patients with families there to support them do better than those who go it alone.

?These are all just as important as the food you put in your mouth,? she said.

Bellerose said these insights have been around for hundreds of years, but it's only recently that they've been brought together in a coherent approach

The prognosis is looking positive, as far as Bellerose is concerned. She said a pathology report has stated there's no cancer in the chest wall. There are swollen lymphnodes, but she said that's normal after this kind of surgery.

?I made a really, really rapid recovery from the surgery,? she said, adding she's been leading a full and normal life for more than six weeks. But she also said she will never take for granted that she could slip back into the sloppy behaviour that she believes led to the cancer.

?I'm working every day to live in awareness and take nothing for granted,? she said.

When asked if she was optimistic about the future, her reply was simply ?Why not??

She also said her husband has been supportive during this time, helping her make the lifestyle changes.

?The whole family is affected by the situation,? she said, adding he's taken on some parts of the diet and other changes. ?You can't expect the world to change around you.

