



Putting Cancer to Work

Returning to work after breast cancer

By Katherine Abraham, Hons. BA

The statistics surrounding cancer are astounding; with 1 in 5 Canadians expected to develop cancer in their lifetimes, it is increasingly likely that every Canadian will be affected by a cancer diagnosis, either in themselves or a loved one.

By the end of 2012 the Canadian Cancer Society estimates over 186,000 new cases of cancer will be diagnosed; over 26 per cent of women's diagnoses will be breast cancer. This year will also find 200 men diagnosed with breast cancer. With 27,700 new cases expected this year, breast cancer is currently the single most prevalent cancer among Canadian women.

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If the numbers weren't overwhelming enough, actually being diagnosed with breast cancer and realising that your whole life is about to change can be devastating. The challenges that one must face while fighting cancer are many. Patients and their families become drained emotionally, mentally, physically, and in many cases financially. While undergoing cancer treatments, a patient's ability to work is severely limited. This time away from work can definitely impact that person's financial stability, adding to an already stressful situation. So, how do

women cope with going back to work after what is often an extended time spent away?

Jeff Beach is the executive director of Willow Breast Cancer Support Canada, which offers peer support from compassionate individuals, most of whom are survivors themselves. "Our peer support staff and volunteers often share their own post-treatment and return to work stories. We provide patients with the tools they need in order to make the right decision for themselves," explains Beach.

Not surprisingly, a cancer diagnosis can be quite shocking and leave you with more questions than answers. Beach and Willow aim to provide the answers and support newly diagnosed people so desperately crave. Some of Willow's most commonly asked questions centre on return to work concerns, such as; When I return to work, who do I tell? I am not ready to go back, what can I do? I can't afford not to work, how do I handle working while undergoing treatment? What resources are there for financial assistance?

Beach explains that 80 per cent of respondents experience a financial impact, and that, reasonably, financial concerns are what drive most individuals; "Willow has a province specific booklet that helps people navigate the financial difficulties associated with breast cancer." Willow provides lists of resources online and will also mail out information to clients, free of charge. Beach emphasizes the importance of making a patient's access to information as effortless as possible.

Tricia Datené was diagnosed with breast cancer in February of 2007. Coming in the wake of losing two of her best friends to the disease, Datené was in terrible shock. As a vocational rehabilitation professional working for WorkSafeBC in Kamloops, British Columbia, Datené was used to helping people pull through some of the roughest times of their lives; she never expected to be on the other side of things. "Little did I know that the day I was diagnosed would be my last day at work for almost five years," she remembers.

For even the strongest of people, enduring months of chemotherapy and radiation treatments can be emotionally and physically draining. Datené had to carry the added weight of losing a third friend, her best friend of 40 years, to leukemia in the middle of everything. Not being able to work during the treatments, she had nothing to distract herself from everything that was happening around her, and there was a lot happening.

Through all the treatments, Datené developed difficulty with fine motor tasks with her hands. After four months of chemo and six weeks of radiation, she remembers feeling like it was finally time to get on with her except she found that she just couldn't get on with anything. "I was grieving and depressed, and needed to see a counsellor," she recalls. As a much needed ray of light, Datené found a counsellor who helped her deal with the emotional consequences of her fight with cancer.

Except for the first couple of months, Datené recalls her employer did not contact her to see if she was

able to return to work. As a result of her combination of treatments, Datené developed lymphedema in her right arm as well as a secondary infection. These new ailments required regular treatment, antibiotics, and physiotherapy. "As each new symptom or side effect reared its head, I began to give up my thoughts about returning to work," recalls Datené.

When she felt physically and mentally fit enough, Datené contacted her employer's return-to-work Coordinator. It was five months before the human resources office considered her request to return to work (in a different office closer to her home). Finally, Datené was told she would be returning to work but would need to go through a 12-week training program for vocational rehabilitation consultants. At this point it had been five years since she last worked, there had be countless changes in policy and systems during that time. Datené, essentially, had to start over.

Just as every person is unique, so is each person's battle with cancer. It was 13 years ago when Vivian Medley found out about her breast cancer diagnosis. With three kids, aged seven, five, and one at the time, Medley's daily life shifted from family-focused to her own personal treatment. While a stay at home mom at the time, Medley's fight wasn't immediately plagued with her return-to-work prospects. During her recovery, Medley was inspired to

rejoin the workforce as a vocational consultant, where she has been working for the past five years.

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Since becoming a breast cancer survivor, Medley has dedicated her work-life to helping over people overcome life altering barriers. As a consultant with a degree of flexibility with regards to the weight of her caseload, she takes a special interest in certain clients, "I have always made room in my caseload to accept a file for a client with a diagnosis of breast cancer." Medley insists that people fighting breast cancer are a special breed, "Without exception, they are the most motivated clients with whom I have had the privilege to work." She describes her clients as a determined group of people who are highly motivated to reclaim their health and return to their pre-health event way of life, including work.

She admits that, as a survivor herself, she can relate to her clients plight in so many ways, "I have never shared my diagnosis with a client for professional reasons but I have been able to refer them to resources which I have found

to be invaluable."

Medley's road to recovery wasn't easy, in fact, it wasn't even a road. It was, and is, water. In 2003, four years into her cancer battle, Medley became involved in a breast cancer survivor dragon boat team. Formed in 1996 in Vancouver, BC, dragon boat racing has expanded across the country to form teams of breast cancer survivors in every province. It may not be the most traditional coping technique, it certainly worked for Medley. She says, dragon boating "is the most positive experience that has resulted from my breast cancer diagnosis, and has helped me move forward and maintain a healthy and positive outlook on life." Her experience was so impactful that she even wrote a children's book about dragon boat racing, entitled *Something Completely Different*.

Medley explains that being these teams (one in New Brunswick and one in Ontario) and writing her book has helped her to meet countless other breast cancer survivors and be inspired by their stories. Datené found her re-training to be a great transitional time, acting as a refresher course and great way to ease back into the job again. While their return-to-work journeys may not have always been smooth or straight forward, neither Medley nor Datené will deny that getting back to work after fighting breast cancer was the right decision for them. ☺

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