

Awareness is key in battle against cancer

By CINDY YURTH
TSÉYI' BUREAU

WINDOW ROCK - When Marian Anderson was diagnosed with breast cancer in April of 2006, her first thought was, "Why this Navajo?"

"Honestly, I thought I was the first Navajo to get breast cancer," said the 62-year-old from Burell Ridge, Ariz.

Her doctor assured her that wasn't true. In fact, 427 registered Indian Health Service patients are living with cancer in the Fort Defiance area alone, and among those, breast cancer is the leading diagnosis.

But statistics are one thing and faces are another. Anderson finally stopped feeling alone when she went to Albuquerque for her chemotherapy and saw "all these Native Americans sitting there."

Anderson's experience is typical, even among people who know better, said Linda Valley, a nurse at Fort Defiance Hospital.

"I think everyone, when they first get that diagnosis, feels like they're the only one," Valley said. "In fact there are so many networks, so many support groups, so many resources available to you."

Valley was one of several people manning a booth Saturday at the 2nd Annual Cancer Awareness and Advocacy Conference in Window Rock, sponsored by the Arizona Myeloma Network.

The conference is the brainchild of Mechelle Morgan-Flowers, another IHS nurse who found herself concerned about the misinformation - and just plain lack of information - circulating about cancer on the Navajo Nation.

The culprit is the taboo against talking about death or deadly things, agreed several Navajo speakers at the conference.

Even medicine man Harrison Jim Sr. thought that perhaps it is time to get past that taboo, as it is costing the Navajos lives.

T.C. Tso's sister may be typical. President Joe Shirley Jr.'s aide squeezed in a visit to the conference between competing appointments



Marian Anderson

because he felt strongly about sharing his family's story.

Tso's sister died two weeks ago of stomach cancer that may have been treatable in its early stages, Tso told the crowd of about 200. Instead, the family engaged in lively denial for months.

"It started around last Thanksgiving," Tso said. "She couldn't keep food down. She was having pain. Everyone said, 'Oh, it's the holidays. She's probably overeating.'"

Finally, after New Year's, that excuse no longer seemed plausible and the family took her to the doctor.

In addition to not liking to talk about disease, Tso said, Navajos are "real stingy with our bodies," which can cause people to put off checkups.

"We don't allow anybody to probe or fondle us," Tso said, "but that's how cancers are caught."

Ophelia Spencer, a Diné research assistant at the University of New Mexico's Cancer Epidemiology and Prevention Department, said she has found that although Navajos don't have a higher rate of cancer than the general population, they tend to die of cancer at a much higher rate.

"It's just what people are saying," she said. "They don't come in until they're already in Stage 2 or 3."



Cancer survivor Marian Anderson from Burell Ridge, which is near Sawmill, Ariz., shows the bump on her wrist she says is a side-affect from her medication she has to take as part of her recovery from breast cancer Saturday in Window Rock at the cancer awareness seminar. The seminar was hosted by the Arizona Myeloma Network. (Special to the Times - Donovan Quintero)

To combat this, Spencer has created "Cancer 101," an informational presentation in the Navajo language she takes to senior centers and chapter houses in the Eastern Navajo area.

Another new initiative is the Diné Breast Cancer Awareness and Prevention Training Program, or "Women Helping Women," as it is nicknamed.

Two years ago Morgan-Flowers and Barbara Kavanagh of the Arizona Myeloma Network came up with the idea to use a network of Diné volunteers, preferably breast cancer survivors, to reach out to newly diagnosed women.

The women obtained a grant for \$26,600 from the Susan G. Komen Foundation to train six to eight volunteers. Twenty-five showed up, including, to Morgan-Flowers' surprise, two men.

They didn't turn anyone away. "We can use everybody," Morgan-Flowers said. "We'll take shifts if we need to."

Among the volunteers was Anderson, who is still on maintenance medication but has been cancer-free for more than three years now.

Anderson said she wants to reach out to others because she's grateful for those who reached out to her.

"You learn more from the other patients than you do from your doctor," she said. "The doctor forgets to tell you some things."

Anderson said she was raised traditionally, and it's still hard for her to talk about her cancer. She's working hard to get past that because, she said, you never know when you're going to inspire someone.

"After I had my surgery, I was feeling bad," she said. "It was only a lumpectomy, but I had lost a piece of me. Then I ran into this younger woman who had had both breasts removed. She said, 'Well, the important thing is that we're both

still alive, right?' It made me put it into perspective."

In fact, Anderson would like to reach out to any cancer patients reading this who are going through the hell of treatment right now, and share a few encouraging words:

"Think about your family," she said. "That's what got me through. Especially my grandson Matthew who helped me shave my head and walk up the stairs when I couldn't do it on my own. And my other grandboys. I had to stay strong for them."

Information:
www.azmyelomanetwork.org