

CANCER CHANGED MY PERSPECTIVE

By Paula Pistorius, CARTI Dosimetrist and Breast Cancer Survivor



Paula Pistorius surrounded by her treatment team and colleagues

I remember so clearly April 5, 1976 – “opening day” at CARTI. We treated CARTI’s very first patients in our sparkling new state-of-the-art treatment facility. I never dreamed that 30 years later, I would be a patient on the other side of the treatment room door. I was a therapist treating patients until 1980 when I graduated as a member of the first class of CARTI’s RTT school. I transferred to my position as a dosimetrist in 1980 and work with our doctors and physicists planning treatment and assisting with gynecology procedures and prostate seed implants.

I’ve just recently celebrated my 3 year “anniversary” of my breast cancer diagnosis. Yes, MY diagnosis. Haven’t I spent the last 34 years as a part of the CARTI team in the “fight” to cure other people? This wasn’t supposed to happen to me OR my husband. But it did. We were surprised when my husband, Bryan, was diagnosed at 58 with prostate cancer. His dad had been diagnosed, so Bryan had been careful to have annual checkups. Bryan is now almost 6 years out after the prostate seed implant performed by Dr. Gao. As for me, I’m doing just fine and am so grateful. All three of my “cancer doctors” tell me that I’m doing great! It’s actually (almost) easy to forget that “Mrs. Pistorius” is three years into this journey.

My cancer experience began when I went for my

annual mammogram, never expecting anything to be wrong. I started to worry a little when I had to return for a diagnostic mammogram, followed by a biopsy. I had a benign breast biopsy many years ago so I thought this was probably not cancer. But it was.

The radiologist called who called to tell me asked, “Paula, are you alright?” I responded “Not exactly.” That is really a pretty good description of how anyone with an early stage disease feels after those words – “You have CANCER”. I wasn’t feeling ill. The small tumor was obviously not something I was aware of. I just went for my annual mammogram and that was the start of my journey.

Diagnosis, followed by surgery. Then my first visit to my “chemo doctor”. This was a very sobering experience for me and each visit is still intimidating to me even now. I am blessed to have been diagnosed early enough that I didn’t require chemotherapy. I’m taking an “estrogen blocker” that I will take for a total of five years.

That brings me to the next and most personal “stop” along this journey – my first visit as a patient with Dr. Maners, the radiation oncologist I’ve worked alongside for years. I’m now “Mrs. Pistorius”, the breast cancer patient. Even almost 35 years of working at CARTI

didn’t prepare me for this. All those questions I’ve heard patients ask over the years were literally now “life or death” questions. In July 2007, I began my radiation therapy treatments. I knew exactly what was going to be happening to me. But I never realized how high that treatment table was in the air until I was on it. I didn’t know about all of the noises the machine would make as it was treating me. And I didn’t imagine just how alone I would feel when the therapist left me in the room and closed “The Door.” But thanks to Dr. Maners and Dr. Gao and all of my caring colleagues, I breezed through my six weeks of treatment.

Words can not begin to express my appreciation to everyone at CARTI. I was confident I was getting the

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best treatment. After all, I’ve witnessed first hand the level of quality treatment provided to all of our patients. But, just as importantly, I am blessed to have personally experienced that uniquely “famous” CARTI emotional support that we give to all of our patients.

I can look back on this as a very personal example of all that CARTI provides to those of us who travel this road to recovery.

As I begin to think of retirement, I will be searching for a new role to help CARTI continue to focus on the care and treatment of the entire patient and their families. I’m proud to say that I’ve had a part of CARTI’s success/history since it began almost 35 years ago. And I look forward to helping lots of fellow cancer patients along their journey for many years to come.

BRINGING NEW HOPE THROUGH ADVANCED RADIATION THERAPY

Findings of a recent study indicate that stereotactic body radiotherapy (SBRT), a relatively new treatment option offered by CARTI, has shown to improve survival and local control for patients facing diagnoses of inoperable lung cancer.

“This is the first significant change in these patients in 50 years,” said Robert Timmerman, MD, professor of radiation oncology at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas.

Lead author of the study recently published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, Timmerman presented the findings at the annual meeting of the American Society for Radiation Oncology where he concluded that SBRT is “strikingly better than conventional radiotherapy” in cases of inoperable, early-stage lung cancer.

“SBRT is a newer radiation therapy treatment,” explained Jan Burford, CARTI president and chief executive officer. A recognized leader in the field, CARTI is

currently the only radiation therapy provider in Arkansas that offers SBRT.

The historically preferred treatment for lung cancer patients has generally been surgery. Some lung cancer patients, however, are deemed unfit for surgery as a result of other medical conditions such as cardiopulmonary disease related to smoking.

Previously, such patients have typically received conventional radiation therapy involving upwards of 20-30 individual treatments, even though statistics showed a high risk of local failure.

“SBRT is a noninvasive treatment in which numerous small, highly focused and extremely accurate radiation beams are used to deliver potent doses to tumor targets in one to five visits,” said Burford.

“What this means for patients identified as candidates for SBRT is that they can now receive stronger, more precise and, hopefully, more effective treatment in far less time,” said Burford.

New Stereotactic Body Radiotherapy Treatment at CARTI Offers New Hope for Inoperable, Early Stage Lung Cancer Patients