

BEATING BREAST CANCER

IN THEIR CORNER

Oncologist helps women feel 'fearless' in fighting breast cancer

By Jessica Carney,
for The Gazette
Photo by Jim Slosiarek

Dr. Ann Stroh, a medical oncologist at Hall-Perrine Cancer Center in Cedar Rapids, received Mercy Medical Center's Patient Advocate Award last year.



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Dr. Ann Stroh draws inspiration from the women she treats for cancer.

“Women tend to be pretty tough. They want to go after their cancer and meet it head-on,” said Stroh, a medical oncologist at Hall-Perrine Cancer Center in Cedar Rapids who specializes in breast cancer treatment.

Two of Stroh’s former patients recently asked her to help them design a permanent symbol of their battle — a tattoo.

They asked Stroh to write the word “Fearless,” incorporating a ribbon in the letters. She decided to join them, and all three — doctor and patients — got the same tattoo in August.

CHALLENGING WORK

It was a bright spot in what is, without question, a challenging field of work. Stroh said oncologists frequently deal with loss.

“A week ago, I lost four people. These are people I’ve seen as often as once a week for three years,” she said. “It can be emotionally exhausting.”

Yet, there is a great deal of hope in the ongoing battle against breast cancer. Promising advances in treatment are helping patients live longer, healthier lives.

Genomic testing to predict the risk of recurrence is one of the most significant developments in recent years, Stroh said.

Another relatively new development, immunotherapy, hasn’t shown as much promise for breast cancer as it has for

other types of cancer, but Stroh said she’s beginning to see encouraging developments, especially for triple-negative breast cancer.

But it’s preventive care that has moved more into the forefront.

Genetic counselors can look for specific mutations and combine that information with risk factors — like body mass index, age and the onset of menstruation — to determine someone’s lifetime risk of breast cancer. Once a woman is aware she’s at higher risk, she can take preventative measures, such as getting more frequent exams.

CLINICAL TRIALS

Stroh matches many of her patients with clinical trials and is the principal investigator for numerous breast cancer studies.

All clinical trials have criteria for who can participate, such as age and type of breast cancer, but Stroh said general knowledge about the patient also plays a role. It’s one of the reasons she makes an effort to learn a little bit about each patient’s life.

“Some of selecting clinical trials is picking what your gut tells you,” Stroh said.

A gut feeling is also what led Stroh to her specialty.

FINDING HER CALLING

She always knew she wanted to be a physician, but she didn’t know where she wanted to focus until her residency ►

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at the University of Iowa–Des Moines program when she completed a rotation with a physician who focused on breast cancer.

She noticed some of the patients she met — as many as 10 percent to 20 percent by her estimate — were young women who could have easily been friends of hers.

She didn't look back after that experience.

"Breast cancer chose me," she said.

The native Iowan worked in the Des Moines area for several years before moving to Colorado with her family in 2009. While in Colorado, she served on numerous committees related to breast cancer research and treatment and spearheaded an annual breast physician retreat.

But she started to miss her family in Iowa.

"All of our vacations were coming back to Iowa every three months," she said.

She was thrilled to accept the position with Mercy so she could continue to do the work she's passionate about while raising her kids in her home state.

The "boomerang" Iowan has been back home for four years.

RECOGNITION

Since starting at Mercy, she's emerged as a leader.

Last year, she was recognized by her colleagues when they voted for her to receive Mercy's Patient Advocate Award, which honors health care providers who go above and beyond for their patients. She's also taken on extra administrative duties and is often one of the first to try new processes, like working with Mercy's recently added scribes.

Hiring scribes — to help with notetaking that goes into a patient's chart — is part of Mercy's effort to improve each physician's quality of life.

Stroh believes that effort is crucial.

"Physician burnout is pretty high," she said. "It's important to keep good physicians at the top of their field."

The busy doctor has her own ways of coping with stress, mainly by spending time with family and working out.

Perhaps not so surprisingly, one of her regular workout partners is a former patient who's now in remission.

They bumped into each other at the gym one day and now meet there regularly. Sometimes they talk about medical things, but other times they just enjoy each other's company.

"We go punch a bag together," Stroh said.

"Women tend to be pretty tough. They want to go after their cancer and meet it head-on."
