

IN A CLOUD OF CANCER A SILVER LINING

Kathie McWhirter considers herself blessed.



Janet Merfeld, MD
Medical Director,
Hall Radiation Center

The warm, friendly, 66-year-old Mount Pleasant woman sees only the silver lining of any cloud on her horizon. Even breast cancer.

Until last summer, Kathie's annual mammograms were clear. But her Aug. 12 mammogram at Henry County Health Center in Mount Pleasant, IA, detected tiny calcifications in her left breast. More X-rays led her radiologist to recommend a needle biopsy, which she underwent Aug. 19. When her family doctor called her the next day, Kathie says, "I thought, 'This can't be good.'"

The biopsy showed that Kathie had ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS), cancer of the breast ductal cells, considered the most common type of non-invasive breast cancer. She was immediately referred to Dr. Michelle Tansey, a surgeon at Henry County Health Center in Mount Pleasant.

"She met with me the very next day," Kathie says. "She gave me such an education. We were in her office for two hours! I felt empowered; knowledge is power."

Because the affected area was so small, Dr. Tansey recommended a lumpectomy and the surgery took place on Aug. 25.

The next step was radiation. But the silver lining was that Kathie qualified for treatment at Mercy's Hall Radiation Center with the cutting-edge High Dose Radiation (HDR) system, an effective breast cancer treatment that allows preservation of the breast and minimal damage to healthy, surrounding tissue.

"If a person had to be told, 'You need radiation therapy,' this was the best possible scenario," Kathie says.

After working with Hall Radiation Center staff on procedural preparations, Dr. Tansey operated Sept. 15 to implant a tiny balloon with a catheter in Kathie's breast. After a follow-up CT scan two days later at Mercy, Kathie got the green light to begin treatment Sept. 20.

Dr. Janet Merfeld, radiation oncologist and medical director of Hall Radiation Center, was with her every step of the way.

"I immediately liked Dr. Merfeld," she recalls. "She's so brilliant, but so personable. She has wonderful communication with her patients. I felt like I was right where I needed to be."

Just one month after her initial diagnosis, Kathie began HDR with the patented MammoSite technology. The treatment, explains Kim

Salzbrenner, director of Hall Radiation Center, involves moving a radioactive seed "about the size of a grain of rice" from the HDR machine by catheter into the tumor or cavity where the tumor was. The length of each treatment depends on the dose needed, she adds. Afterward, the seed is returned through the catheter to the HDR machine. A limited CT scan of the treatment site is done before each HDR session; physicists on staff recalculate the dose needed according to any changes in the site revealed by the CT scan.

HDR allows for a more precise focus on the cancer, limits exposure of surrounding tissues and

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*Kathie McWhirter
Cancer patient*

expedites treatment. Kathie underwent two MammoSite treatments each day.

"This is only partial breast radiation,"

Salzbrenner explains, "It's targeted.

It's really nice for the patients because instead of six weeks, HDR takes only five days."

"MammoSite is so great,"

Kathie says. "I didn't have to wait for my incision [from the lumpectomy] to heal before having the HDR. And my stay at Mercy was superb. I felt, 'I'm safe' and everyone was so professional in such a kind way."

On her last day, the balloon and catheter were removed. Hall Radiation Center staff cheered Kathie and gave her a "graduation" certificate.

"I had no tenderness or damage to my skin," Kathie reports. "No pain. No nausea. It couldn't have gone better."

Kathie needs no chemotherapy. She will take a post-menopausal hormone inhibitor, Arimidex, for five years. She's an even stronger advocate now for regular mammograms and cutting-edge healthcare.

"Early detection is our best defense; I'm proof of that," she says. "I've always been a thankful person. Now I have reason to be even more so."

After receiving High Dose Radiation with MammoSite technology for breast cancer, Kathie McWhirter is feeling great and back to one of her favorite pastimes – antiques.