



Grace and her mother, together with Dr Khoo

COMBATING BREAST CANCER AT 29

“ I thank God for giving me the strength to go through the most difficult period of my life. I want people to know that life goes on even if you have cancer and there’s nothing to be fearful of. You can beat breast cancer! ”

~Grace~

“Who would have thought that at 29 years of age, I actually have breast cancer?” Grace recounted her ordeal in April last year. She thought something was amiss when she performed breast self-examination and felt a lump in her breast.

The first thing that raced through her mind was, “I hope it’s not cancer! Somehow, I feared for the worst. I went to see Dr Wee Siew Bock, General Surgeon at Mount Elizabeth Hospital in Singapore, where tests such as Computed Tomography (CT) and bone scans were done immediately to determine the nature of my breast lump.”

Grace’s worst fears were confirmed when the biopsy report revealed that she had stage II breast cancer. The tumour was confined to her breast. Dr Wee explained to her in a calm and reassuring voice, “Breast cancer can be treated and cured, it is not a death sentence nor is it something you should do nothing about.”

Although the cancer is at stage II, Dr Wee said that prompt treatment can still make a great difference in the chance of a cure and survival from the cancer. Surgery has a big role in treatment with the surgical removal of the cancer. The cancer that has been removed is subject to further analysis, which will provide information to determine the most effective type of treatment needed after surgery that will result in the highest cure rate. In a case where the cancer occupies a large area of the breast, removal of the entire breast (mastectomy) cannot be avoided.

“I did my homework before going to see Dr Wee. He told me that my entire breast tissue will be removed completely with a safe margin, and explained how the surgery would be carried out. I knew I was in safe hands.”

A mastectomy was performed on Grace, followed by the reconstruction of her breast. According to Dr Wee, this is an increasingly popular option where the breast and cancer will be removed completely and a new ‘breast’ is created using a combination of an implant and back muscle to fill the void left after removal of

the diseased breast. Preservation of the skin envelope of the original breast allows a near-normal outward appearance right after surgery, which is vital in helping the patient cope with the emotional trauma of not having a breast, especially in a young lady. Grace recovered very fast with mobility in her left hand in about a week.

As the risk of recurrence was still significant, Grace was recommended to receive her chemotherapy and hormonal treatment under the care of Dr Khoo Kei Siong, Deputy Director and Medical Oncologist at Parkway Cancer Centre.

Dr Khoo said that Grace is one of the younger patients with breast cancer that he has seen. "Most of the breast cancers occur in women after the age of 40," he said. "When someone as young as Grace is diagnosed to have breast cancer, it raised the question of whether her cancer is hereditary. Grace has what is commonly referred to as 'triple negative' breast cancer. It means it is negative for estrogen receptor, progesterone receptor and HER2 receptor. This type of breast cancer is not responsive to hormonal therapy or Herceptin. It tends to be more aggressive and is also common in hereditary breast cancer." Grace was told about the possibility of her cancer being hereditary and the implication of the genetic testing for mutation in BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes that were integral to her care.

Recalled Dr Khoo, "When I spoke about the need for her to have chemotherapy, she neither teared nor broke down. In fact, she took it matter-of-factly. I remember her asking, "When shall we start?" She is really one brave young lady."

Grace took to her chemotherapy relatively well. Although there were the usual side effects, she was always in high spirits during her treatment sessions, and faced her illness with bravery and a positive attitude.

Instead of wallowing in self-pity, she comforted her distraught parents, especially her mother who accompanied her for treatment in Singapore three times a week via the shuttle service provided by ParkwayHealth Patient Assistance Centre in Johor Bahru.



Dr Wee Siew Bock, General Surgeon at Mount Elizabeth Hospital

"One would inevitably have some negative thoughts initially. No doubt I will still be upset when I feel sick or unwell, but I will try to divert my attention from the negative thoughts and feelings by keeping my mind preoccupied with other things," she said.

She added that her healthy diet has helped to boost her immunity system and her diet now includes foods such as Japanese sweet potatoes, beetroot and fresh fruit juices with lots of enzymes. She even asked Susan, her counsellor to conduct a class on how to make fruit enzymes for the Cancer Support Group in Malaysia so as to help other cancer patients cope better in their treatment.

Grace's last chemotherapy ended in September and her cancer is in complete remission now. "I thank God for giving me the strength to go through the most difficult period of my life. I want people to know that life goes on even if you have cancer and there's nothing to be fearful of. You can beat breast cancer!"

Grace is an example and a reminder that breast cancer can strike at any age, and all women should be aware of their personal risk factors for breast cancer. Although mammography is recommended for women aged 40 and above, it is prudent to start doing breast self-examination at an early age.



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