

Early detection

Local woman's cancer battle shows how you must be assertive in your medical care

BY HARB PERT TEMPLETON
SPECIAL WRITER

"I'm never sick. I have cancer but I'm never sick."

That's the line Rita O'Brien found herself reciting for the better part of last summer.

The statement reflected the irony of a health situation that found the 46-year-old mother of three feeling fine one moment and literally battling ovarian cancer the next.

Persistence in seeking treatment, a devoted family and a crew of top doctors at the University of Michigan Hospital in Ann Arbor helped save O'Brien's life. Her story is a shocking tale of how a brief stomach upset led to a diagnosis of cancer and reflects how education and caring physicians are tantamount to survival.

O'Brien, who is the owner of Target Travel Services in Birmingham, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer last June.

"The signs are so vague they aren't found by a normal check-up," said O'Brien, who garnered a speedy education on the disease. "Lower back pain, fatigue, bloating, lack or appetite or in

some cases eating too much are all symptoms."

The week before she was diagnosed she had been in Florida for a seminar and recalls feeling both tired and bloated much of the time.

"I figured I was just stressed out from running a business and everything," she said. "That's why it's called a silent killer."

A severe attack of abdominal pain, almost like someone was pushing down on her uterus, sent O'Brien to her regular gynecologist shortly after her return from Florida. She wasn't happy about having to argue to get the appointment.

"They told me if I felt that bad, to go to an emergency room," O'Brien said. "I called back again and insisted that someone see me the next morning even though my own doctor wasn't available."

After the exam O'Brien said the doctor told her she had fibroid tumors. He okayed an ultra sound although he clarified it by saying I'm sure it's nothing important. When she returned to her doctor's office for an ultra sound the next day the matter turned gravely "important."

"The technician said to me, 'I'm so

■ Noting that "the suspicious nature of her tumor" was a concern he referred her to a general cancer surgeon. When O'Brien placed a call to the surgeon's office she was told it would be at least a month to get an appointment. When she explained the urgency of her situation, she was told "everyone thinks they have an emergency".

sorry to tell you this but you don't have fibroid tumors you have a mass on your ovary. It was shocking," said O'Brien. "Then she continued on saying she saw a large tumor on my ovary. The technician just kept saying I'm so sorry to tell you this, I'm so sorry."

Seeking answers

Going home to wait out the weekend with her family was grueling.

O'Brien only new two things about ovarian cancer at that time. One, was that her neighbor had just died of it. Two, was that the general consensus is that once they find it, it's too late.

When she talked with her doctor on Monday morning comfort was still in short supply. He reiterated that he was sorry about her test result and said, at the minimum, the tumor's size indicated a hysterectomy.

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"I just couldn't believe it. You're falling apart during all of this and they are acting as if you're just neurotic," said O'Brien.

That call prompted her sister Donna Dumas to step in. She had been standing by to offer moral support to O'Brien and quickly agreed to call a friend who knew a doctor at U of M.

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