

Fighting cancer

She enlists courage — and interferon

By Kathy McPhail Friedrichs
special writer

PAT SEGADI is 34 and fighting a courageous battle against cancer. And she is making some headway.

"Attitude is tremendously important," says this Redford resident. "There are days I get depressed, but not whole days. Whenever I get depressed I see the cancer inside me saying, 'Yeah! She's letting down. Now we can take over.'"

"But I won't let it. I'll go down fighting."

Right now, a major battle is taking an experimental new treatment involving interferon — a controversial new virus-fighting substance that some doctors believe stimulates the growth of antibodies in the body to fight cancerous cells.

Ms. Segadi was selected to take the new drug at Sparrow Hospital in Lansing. Being in the program involves driving there three times a week for injections. It also involves paying \$2,000 every six weeks because Blue Cross-Blue Shield won't pick up the tab on an experimental treatment.

And that involves keeping up her

full-time job as a secretary in Southfield.

But it's worth it to her. Since she started interferon, the antibodies in her blood have increased tenfold and some of her tumors have decreased in size.

PAT SEGADI'S battle began three years ago when she discovered cancer in her right breast.

"At first I thought it was a fluke; I felt so good and healthy," she said. "I thought, 'I'm going to be the unique one to come out of this OK.'"

She had a partial radical mastectomy, and afterwards underwent chemotherapy for a year and nine months. Then the doctors took her off the chemotherapy because no trace of cancer occurred.

Then came marriage to Gary Segadi, and after that the big blow struck.

Cancer was discovered in her other breast, and this time it had spread to her lungs.

This was a different kind of cancer, the doctors told her. It was inoperable and incurable.

"They told me that if I was lucky I had four good years left," she said.

Anger was her reaction this time.

It was the timing the new bride resented. "I was so happy," she said. "It just didn't seem fair."

But she determined there was nothing she could do but keep up her positive attitude. And that she has done.

THERE HAVE BEEN repeated chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Then came acceptance into the experimental interferon program.

These running that program have been very selective. They accept those who have advanced cancer, have not responded to other forms of treatment and who have one of four cancers — breast cancer, lymphoma, malignant melanoma or multiple myeloma.

Ms. Segadi waited for two months with crossed fingers and finally was accepted.

"I was thrilled," she said, "because deep down inside I am expecting to be cured. I would be lying if I didn't realize that. But I also figured I could help other people learn something, too."

As treatments have progressed, she finds reason for being encouraged and optimistic.

And Dr. Francis Breen Jr., director of medical oncology at Sparrow and head of the interferon program, cautiously supports her optimism.

"Pat Segadi's blood is now killing 10 times more cancer cells than it used to," he said. "If Pat remains stabilized, we would consider that a success."

ANY SUCCESS would have to be encouraging for this fighter.

She watched her father die of stomach cancer six months before her own cancer illness was diagnosed.

When she took the chemotherapy treatments, she lost all her hair and became terribly sick. Repeated intravenous chemotherapy made her veins collapse and she had to have an artificial tube inserted into her neck. The tube sticks out of her chest and needs constant maintenance to prevent infection.

And she has the constant support of a loving husband, a shop teacher at Smart Junior High at Union Lake.

"Pat is a fantastic lady and wife who I love very much," he said. "I want to make each day a happy one instead of a depressing one."



Despite her illness, Pat took a bike trip during the summer and enjoys riding regularly.



Pat and Gary Segadi of Redford lead a pretty normal life most of the time.



Except that three times a week Pat gets a shot of interferon as treatment for cancer. It's being administered at Sparrow Hospital in Lansing by nurse Wilma Kehler.

Interferon 'not a cure-all, but useful'

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The drug interferon is experimental and controversial. But right now it's the foundation of Pat Segadi's living and a basic part of the work done by Dr. Francis Breen Jr., director of medical oncology at Sparrow Hospital in Lansing.

The drug, the doctor and the cancer patient meet three times a week when Pat drives from her Redford home to the hospital, is examined by Dr. Breen and receives an interferon shot. Once a week she gives a blood sample so the progress of the treatment can be measured.

"Interferon is a natural biological product made in our bodies in response to viral infections," said Dr. Breen. "But our bodies only make it in very minute amounts."

Sparrow Hospital is one of six centers in the country that artificially produces interferon, a substance based on the theory of viral interference. It makes use of the ability of white blood cells to fight infection.

Manufacturing this substance involves a process called pheresis, and a healthy blood donor.

DURING PHERESIS, the donor has a needle in both arms. His blood is taken from one arm, run through a special machine, and returned into the other arm.

The three-hour process extracts the white blood cells and returns the red blood cells to the donor's

body, which almost immediately replaces them and seems to suffer no change in its immunity system.

But the white cells go on to fight cancer.

They are put into a vat. A standardized virus, Sendai Virus, harmless to humans, is added. This virus is used because it stimulates the production of interferon, Dr. Breen said.

After the mixture is cultured, the interferon is extracted and purified. Then it is ready for use. The whole process takes about one month, and the dosage Pat Segadi gets three times a week requires 288 liters of blood.

That is why, Dr. Breen noted, there is a constant need for more donors of blood for the program.

INTERFERON is not a new substance, Dr. Breen said. It was discovered by Hans Strander in Finland in the 1950s. In the last 10 years it has begun to be noticed in this country.

Recently, said Dr. Breen, it has been hailed as a cancer cure-all, and he thinks that's where people went wrong.

"Interferon is not a cure-all," he said, "but it is useful in treating cancer."

Of 15 patients involved in the eight-month-old experimental program at Sparrow, the doctor said, "We have seen measurable tumor regression in half of them. In two patients, the cancer has completely disappeared."

Pat Segadi's blood is now killing 10 times more cancer cells than it used to, according to Dr. Breen.



Pat consults at Sparrow with her physician, Dr. Francis A. Breen Jr.

Staff photos by Bill Bresler