

Cancer can be beaten if it is detected early

By POLISWA PLAATJIE

Survivors break the silence, go all out to help others

KNOWING and understanding your body is the most essential thing everybody needs to learn, said two local breast cancer survivors.

Sandra Kohler, now 67, was only 29-years-old when she found out she had breast cancer. At the time her youngest child was only four-months-old.

It was through examining herself that Kohler discovered she had a lump on her right breast and immediately consulted a doctor.

“To get a diagnosis of cancer is devastating. No one will understand the impact it has until they get it.”

Kohler said the first thing that came to her mind was, “Am I going to die?”

Kohler said she had never imagined she would get cancer.

“Everybody lives in denial. It is not going to happen to me. No one is ever prepared for something like this,” she said.

After her diagnosis Kohler said she knew she would not be able to go through the surgery alone.

“This developed my faith because I knew I needed God to see me through,” she said.

Kohler is now involved with the Reach for Recovery group which works with cancer patients.

Faith Songca, 71, also examined herself and found a lump on her left breast about six years ago.

“I used to work for the department of education and we had wellness days where we were taught about self-examining our breasts.

“One day I realised I had a lump on my left breast, it was not sore but I told my family about it,” she said.

Songca said her daughter suggested they see a general practitioner for the lump examination.

“After my visit to the doctor I was referred to the hospital for the biopsy to test if the lump was cancerous or not,” she said adding it turned out the lump was cancerous.

“They removed my left breast after the biopsy. I then started seven cycles of chemotherapy,” she said.

Songca went through six chemotherapy sessions for breast cancer before she discovered she had another lump on her collar-bone. It also turned out to be malignant and she had to undergo another six sessions of chemotherapy.

She started losing her hair while undergoing chemotherapy but her strength and determination to survive kept her going.

“After I was diagnosed I immediately accepted I had cancer and I was strong for the chemotherapy.”



SPEAKING UP: After discovering she had cancer, 71-year-old Faith Songca decided to break the silence about the disease in her family and community. Every month she hosts a cancer support group for about 20 women in Mdantsane

Pictures: POLISWA PLAATJIE



REACHING OUT: Sandra Kohler thought she would not live very long when she was diagnosed with cancer at 29. She is now one of the women involved with the Reach for Recovery group for cancer survivors

Songca said after her surgery she decided not to keep quiet about cancer but to use her time to educate other people who had been diagnosed with the disease.

“I talked about it to my family and

after that two males in my family told me they had cancer but never opened up to anyone,” she said adding her father died of cancer.

“I found out my father had cancer when I asked his doctor but I never

told anyone because he did not talk about it,” she said.

Songca urged women to do self-examinations regularly and consult their doctors if they saw something unusual.

“People need to overcome the fear they have of going to a clinic. If you notice something unusual, seek help immediately before the cancer gets worse,” Songca said.

She said after she was diagnosed she started her own support group in Mdantsane where a total of 20 women attend every month.

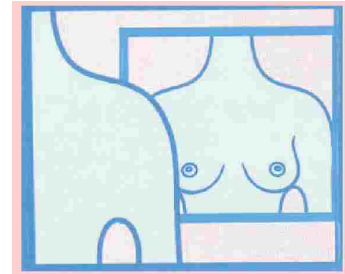
“In African culture people say a person has been bewitched when they have cancer but that is not true. I’ve seen people dying because they believed they were bewitched and went to see sangomas,” she said.

Through the help of the East London Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSAs) both Songca and Kohler have been able to live positive lives full of energy and are an inspiration to other survivors.

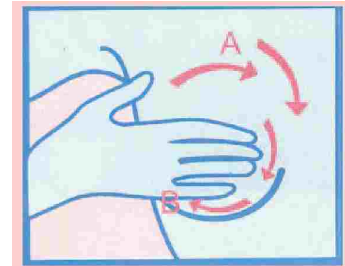
CANSAs educates the public on the importance of recognising the early warning signs and they also encourage early detection of cancers by various methods.

CANSAs counsellor Vuvu Gqibitole

How you do a breast self-examination



Stand in front of a mirror and look carefully for any changes to your breasts



Stand with one hand behind your head and using your fingertips, gently examine your breast in a circular motion. Don't forget to check your armpit. Repeat with the other hand. Feel all the parts of each breast with your fingers; this can be done in the shower



Lie down and put one arm behind your head. With your other hand, check the opposite breast. Repeat on the opposite side

said they encouraged breast examinations, cervical cancer screenings and testicular self examination.

Gqibitole said they also offered patients cancer coping kits, wigs, a prosthesis service, a lymph clinic, medical equipment and counselling.

Every three months Songca goes for a check-up but other than that she lives a normal life and enjoys sharing her story with other people. “I buy books about cancer and when I do my talks I am able to talk about other cancers as well, not just breast cancer.”

Both Songca and Kohler strongly believe people need to do self-examinations often.

“Cancer is not the end but it is the beginning of a different journey,” said Kohler said.

For more details call CANSAs toll-free on 0800-226-622 or visit their East London offices in Berea. — poliswa-p@dispatch.co.za