

Mesothelioma

Bonnie Anderson

Each year, according to mesothelioma facts and statistics, approximately 3,000 or more Americans develop this malignant tumor that—after a latency period of ten to fifty years—aggressively invades the linings of the lungs, abdomen, heart or testicles.

— Mesothelioma Applied Research Foundation

Bonnie Anderson considers herself lucky given her long-standing battle with peritoneal mesothelioma, a rare cancer that targets the lining of the abdominal cavity. Despite a delayed diagnosis, six surgeries, rounds of chemotherapy, a chronic lung infection, and numerous battles with her insurance company, Bonnie's tenacious attitude has kept her fighting and winning against all odds.

Now living in Berkeley Heights, New Jersey, Bonnie was working as a school librarian. In early 2001, she began to experience severe stomach pain, which her doctor diagnosed as irritable bowel syndrome. Treatment did not alleviate her symptoms. Additional tests revealed nothing. Finally in February 2002, Bonnie underwent laparoscopy surgery to remove 6 liters of fluid from her abdomen, allowing her doctors to see a thin cancerous carpet spreading over the interior of the cavity.

"When we first heard the word 'mesothelioma,' we didn't know what it was. Then the doctor explained it in one word: 'cancer,'" recalls Bonnie. The sobering reality for patients with advanced primary peritoneal cancer is a median survival time estimated between 12 and 18 months; five-year survivals are rare.

The treatment options are equally dismal with few medical doctors specializing in such cancers. Yet Bonnie experienced a wonderful twist of fate. Her surgeon had completed his residency at Columbia Presbyterian under John Chabot, MD. Dr. Chabot and his research partner, Robert Taub, MD, were two renowned mesothelioma experts conducting clinical trials in New York City. Although Bonnie went through many rounds of appeals with her insurance company in order to cover her surgeries and experimental treatment, she felt this was the best course of treatment for her. "I knew if I was going to die from mesothelioma, I was going to put it to good use in a clinical trial," she comments in a matter of fact way.

The road to healing has been fraught with setbacks. One treatment triggered hairy cell leukemia, which led to more treatments. Her hip deteriorated from the radiation treatments requiring hip replacement. Then, she contracted an airborne bacteria that led to mycobacterium avium intracellulare, a chronic lung infection found in immune-compromised patients.

Bonnie's condition cost her more than her health. She retired in 2004 when she couldn't even tolerate part-time work at the library. Her husband took 18 months without pay and then retired early in order to take care of her.

Bonnie prays that improved treatments are developed—ones that "aren't so severe and work better!" She hopes that future patients don't have to endure the trial and error approach to being properly diagnosed and treated. More than anything, she wishes that every cancer patient could be considered more than lucky—she wishes they could be cured.

Source: www.curemeso.org/site/c.kkLUJ7MPKtH/b.4124603/k.42EF/The_Tragic_Facts_about_Mesothelioma.htm