

This is a hard column for me to write. It's about something that scares me, and I don't like thinking – much less writing – about things that scare me. I'm talking about cancer. The Big C.



Karen Patterson asked me to write about... gulp, cancer, to help her spread the word about a great event she's in charge of this spring. It's called "Tonight We Unite," and is just one of many such events going on across the country on Livestrong Day, May 13th. Karen is the leader of our local Livestrong Army, the community outreach branch of the Lance Armstrong Foundation.

An eleven-year cancer survivor who soldiered through five years of treatment over three different occurrences of breast cancer, Karen is courageous, committed, and passionate about cancer awareness. I, on the other hand, am a sniveling coward who can barely face her monthly self-exam (which is usually more like copping a cursory feel in the shower)... who failed to cope when her best friend was diagnosed with Hodgkins Disease in high school... who was a shamefully inadequate helpmate when her husband got the same diagnoses six years ago... who still breaks out in a cold sweat at the sound of the word... cancer. Just writing it makes my heart pound.

I'm hoping that, by forcing myself to write this column, I can help Karen Patterson, the general public, *and* myself. Facing fears, and all that. So, I've been timidly perusing the latest research, and the vapors are not yet upon me. Taking lots of deep breaths... Exhaling slowly...

The good news about cancer is that you don't usually have to die from it. Not anymore. Diagnosis is easier than it once was; and treatment is more specific, less *horrific*, and more effective.

This was not the case when Karen Patterson was diagnosed with breast cancer, at the tender age of 41. Unfortunately, it took eight months to *get* that diagnosis in the first place. Because she was so young, and because her breast lump was painful (pain is not usually associated with breast cancer), her doctor told her it was a cyst and sent her home.

What followed was every woman's nightmare. Karen tells her story so much that I can on her website, at www.womens-wellness.com.

"[My doctor] said that I should expect this at my age. She told me to cut down on coffee and nicotine and take vitamin E. I did all those things and the pain went away—but not the lump.

“A few months later I experienced hard stabbing pains that often made me cry out. Eight months later while waiting in a doctor's office, I read an article which stated a cyst could not be diagnosed by feel and should be at least aspirated to be sure it's not malignant. I went to another doctor for a second opinion and was sent to a surgeon that day. By then the lump was the size of a golf ball.

“When I first found the lump I did not do any research. I placed my confidence in the doctor I had trusted for years. I believed what I was told and went on with my life, feeling safe. I did not know the questions to ask and what “Best Practices” were. The result was devastating. I did have breast cancer and the lump had more than doubled in size. Eight months of early detection wasted because I didn't know any better. I felt betrayed and seethed with anger and regret. I was very angry with the doctor, but most of all, I was angry with myself. I'd let myself down. I needed to regain control over this situation.”

And she did. She began doing copious research, talking to experts, coming up with a game plan. Each step was alien and frightening, but the more she learned, the more powerful she felt. As she began to take charge of her health, her fear began to subside, and Karen Patterson was

able to get on with the business of saving her life. Now, two recurrences and eleven years later, working to help others prevent, cope with, and conquer cancer *is* her life.

Looking back, Karen knows she went through some grueling experiences that were probably ineffectual and unnecessary – cancer treatment has come a long way in the past eleven years. Especially in Beaufort.

“We are so fortunate in Beaufort to have a new cancer center with state of the art technology,” she says. “When I went through treatment it was broad band. Shoot the body with so much chemo and radiation that you have to hit the cancer. Now we have radiation technology which is precise, fast, and easy to use. It is a quantum leap...”

(Incidentally, when my husband was treated for Hodgkins just six short years ago, he had to drive to Hilton Head for radiation, every day. For six weeks. Those of you who haven’t been through it have no idea how blessed we are to have the new Keyserling Cancer Center!)

Karen says her greatest frustration is that, even with so many advancements in detection and treatment, too many people are still dying of cancer. There are many reasons for this, and in her role as a cancer awareness advocate, Karen is battling them all. She points to a newspaper ad run by the Lance Armstrong Foundation last year on Livestrong Day, which helps break down the problem:

“Cancer thrives on Division. We are divided in the cancer fight. □ We are hundreds of cancer organizations operating independently. □ □ We are institutions that fail to share everything we know with each other. □ We are a federal government that cuts funding programs and research. We are a society that doesn’t act on what it knows about prevention and screening. We are a country that lets its most vulnerable people bear the brunt of the disease. □ It’s time to unite the fight. □ We are the cancer and we are the cure. □ It’s time to unite the fight. □ Each of us has the power to heal. □ All of us, speaking in unison, can demand that cancer become a national priority.”

Statistics show that the folks hit hardest by cancer are minorities and lower-income citizens. In South Carolina, black women are about 60 percent more likely than white women to die from breast cancer after diagnosis. (It’s the largest such disparity in the nation.) And black men are almost 80 percent more likely to get prostate cancer than white men, and about 2.5 times more likely to die from it. Many variables account for these huge disparities – including diet, exercise, weight, tobacco use, and plain ol’ genetics.

But access (or lack thereof) to information, screening, and treatment options is a big part of the divide, too; and that’s something Karen Patterson isn’t willing to just sit back and accept. That’s why she created her website several years ago, and it’s why she has involved herself – in what some might call an “all-consuming” way – with the Lance Armstrong Foundation. She has a mission – to arm people, especially women, with the knowledge, information, and spiritual support they need to face the challenge of a lifetime. Cancer.

(It’s getting easier to write that word.)

On May 13, Karen will join with other cancer survivors, and those who’ve been touched by cancer (and who hasn’t?) across the country to celebrate “Livestrong Day,” uniting our community at Beaufort High School for an event called “Tonight We Unite.”

“I want to be the ripple that causes the big wave that everyone has to notice,” she says. “I want to grow this local Livestrong army to demonstrate public support for making cancer a national priority and to gain the power necessary to effect change. I want our community to be aware of what the Lance Armstrong Foundation offers survivors and I want to teach others how to unite and advocate for change.

“ I want to work with the man who calls himself one of the toughest cancer survivors on the planet.”

Hey, Karen... Lance Armstrong's got nothin' on you. Anybody who's survived all you have – *and* convinced the world's wimpiest, wussiest patient to sit at her computer pondering The C Word for a sustained period of time – is one tough cookie, herself.

Keep on living strong, my friend.

For more information about the Lance Armstrong Foundation, visit www.laf.org.