

Full Medical Disclosure Helps Yulia Fight Breast Cancer

“When I found the lump in my breast, that was the moment my calm and peaceful life came to an end,” explains Yulia, a 37-year-old economist and mother of three from Kiev. “I had read in books and magazines that after a certain age it is necessary to conduct breast self-examinations, so for the past several years I had been doing this regularly, but nothing can truly prepare a woman for such a discovery.”



PHOTO: KATHRYN UJIAN
Yuri and Yulia, who—as of February 2001—has been cancer-free for 12 months.

Immediately after detecting the lump, Yulia and her husband Yuri went to several medical institutions in Kiev where doctors performed ultrasounds and biopsies, neither of which indicated cancer. It was only when they did a lumpectomy that cancerous cells were found. “They never actually told me that I had cancer, though,” Yulia notes. “I was simply informed that a surgeon would operate and remove the lump, then, while I was still under anesthesia, he would decide whether or not to remove my breast.”

Explaining that the old tradition of Soviet medicine was not to inform patients of the true diagnosis, but just to reassure them that everything is fine, Yuri, a 40-year-old computer programmer, states, “They don’t inform patients if the diagnosis is good or bad; they just say ‘you need an operation’ and that’s the end of the discussion.”

Calling this sort of treatment a crime

against patients, Yulia stresses the importance of providing women with all possible information regarding their condition and what options they have. “In order to beat breast cancer, you must fight it, but you can’t fight if you don’t know what you are fighting or how to go about it.”

Understanding that the couple was uncomfortable with the way they were being treated and looking for more information, many of their friends helped them obtain articles and research about breast cancer. Yuri even contacted acquaintances in Germany and Canada to see if they could send information. “Some people recommended that we go to the Kiev WWC. That was where we finally found out about the cancer diagnosis,” Yulia says. Doctors at the WWC told the couple that radiation treatments and radical surgery were needed and should be followed by chemotherapy and then reconstructive surgery.

“I can’t tell you how frightening it is to hear such a diagnosis,” Yulia says, “but the warm, caring, and open attitude of the staff at the WWC is radically different from that of other clinics and hospitals. That really helped us get through this.” Psychological support in such situations is imperative, she says, noting, “Dr. Kovalchuk performed the operation successfully, kept me well-informed, and supported me and my family throughout the entire process. He gave me the hope I needed to fight. I spoke to a friend who had similar surgery at another place, and the differences in our experiences are like night and day.”

In other oncology institutes, the attitudes toward the patient often harken back to Soviet times, according to Yulia. “They don’t treat patients as living, breathing, thinking beings, but rather as material. They decide what to do and how to do it and if you want to get a second opinion, your original doctor must give his or her permission—and they can say no.”

Explaining that it is typical for people to not trust doctors because, traditionally, medicine was a state institution, Yuri says, “We do not doubt the qualifications of the old-time doctors, but we do question their behavior toward patients. The relationship between a doctor and a patient should be one of open-

AIHA’s Women’s Wellness Centers (WWCs) provide a client-oriented approach to primary healthcare by offering services that specifically address women’s health needs throughout their life continuum.

Several of these innovative Centers offer comprehensive breast health services that include teaching the basics of self-examination, performing clinical exams, and offering mammography screening. This approach is designed to detect changes in a woman’s breast tissue at the earliest possible stage and to follow up with appropriate interventions. At the WWC in Kiev, Ukraine, for example, more than 1,660 mammograms, 630 breast ultrasounds, and 2,183 clinical breast examinations were performed through the breast health program in 2001. These exams resulted in nearly 300 women being diagnosed with breast cancer and the identification of almost 1,000 patients with potentially abnormal pathology. Below is the story of how a WWC’s approach to breast health affected the life of one woman; her doctor’s story is on the other side.*

ness, cooperation, and support. It should be a quick and easy process to gather information about specific conditions and diseases and to link patients to others who are going through the same experiences as a way of psychological support.”

Yulia agrees wholeheartedly. “Surely psychological support is absolutely a key factor in successful treatment. At the WWC, I felt comfortable, calm even, like I was part of a team. I really have a great desire to work with other women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer, to share my experience with them, and maybe make what they are going through a bit easier.”

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