



Kensington family takes positive action to help others facing ovarian cancer

When Jennifer Bowness's mother, Cheryl Clark, started to feel unwell in late 2016, she attributed her lack of appetite and fatigue to stress, her hiatus hernia, and the fact that she was simply getting older.

Mrs. Clark was eventually diagnosed with late stage ovarian cancer in January, and her family was told she would have to leave their home in Kensington, PE, for treatment in Halifax, NS. "It was a lot to take in," says Ms. Bowness. "She never left the hospital after she was diagnosed."

Ovarian cancer is the most fatal women's cancer in Canada. There is no reliable screening test to detect it, and symptoms (if any) can be mistaken for a range of other health issues.

After a rapid decline, Mrs. Clark passed away on March 8, a mere seven weeks after her diagnosis. Ms. Bowness, the second youngest of her four daughters, said on the day before their mother died, her family spoke with the gynecologic oncology team and genetic counsellors in Halifax and agreed to pursue genetic testing.

While all women are at risk for developing ovarian cancer, the risk is higher if there is a genetic predisposition, such as a BRCA gene mutation.

"We obtained the results approximately two weeks ago that mom tested negative for the nine most common gene [mutations] linked to ovarian cancer," says Ms. Bowness. The news brought a measure of relief to the family, but because a family history of the disease is also a risk factor, Ms. Bowness says she and her sisters will meet with their family doctors as well as the gynecological oncology team in Halifax to discuss and consider options for further preventative action for themselves, such as surgery to remove their ovaries and/or fallopian tubes.



The most recent picture of Cheryl Clark with her daughters

“It’s scary for us because we are at a higher risk, but there is no reliable testing for the disease,” she says. “We really see the need for more research.”

In an effort to take positive action, Ms. Bowness and her younger sister Jillian Forbes have banded together to organize the Ovarian Cancer Canada Walk of Hope in Charlottetown this year. Proceeds will be used to provide support, increase awareness and fund vital research into ovarian cancer.

“As a family we’ve really become passionate about doing whatever we can to help. We saw the suffering that mom went through and we don’t want anyone else to have to experience that. So whatever we can do to help, we want to do it,” Ms. Bowness says.



The Clark family: Including Cheryl and Donald Clark with their daughters (from oldest to youngest), Alana, Ambyr, Jennifer and Jillian. (Daughters Jennifer and Jillian are in the floral dresses). They also have 7 grandchildren (5 granddaughters and 2 grandsons)

The sisters have reached out to other families in their region who have also been touched by ovarian cancer, to get involved and help with fundraising efforts. Their own extended family will have a team on Walk day, walking in honour of their late mother.

“I think my father will be very emotional on Walk day – which of course will make things even more emotional for us,” Ms. Bowness says. “If mom was still here with us, she would have been helping us to organize this event. I know she would be 100% supportive. She had a big heart.”

The Ovarian Cancer Canada Walk of Hope will take place on September 9 at Victoria Park in Charlottetown, and on September 10 in more than 35 communities across Canada. For further details about how to register or donate, visit ovariancancerwalkofhope.ca.