



Cancer pharmacist gains new perspective on the disease as an ovarian cancer survivor

Cancer pharmacist Amy Smith-Morris is used to providing front-line care to cancer patients every day, but nothing could have prepared her for her own cancer diagnosis at the age of 30.



Photo credit: Nancy Newby

She had just returned to Saskatoon from her honeymoon in October 2016, when she started to experience heartburn that persisted for a couple of weeks. "I've been an athlete my entire life so I've always been in tune with my body. When something is off, I know," she says.

What followed was a whirlwind of doctors' visits, specialist consultations, ultrasounds and scans until a tumour the size of a football was discovered on one of her ovaries. "I was experiencing heartburn as a result of pressure being placed on my digestive system by a mass," she says. "I went in for surgery two months after I was married and started chemotherapy three weeks later."

Diagnosed with a rare form of ovarian cancer, Dr. Smith-Morris decided to shine a spotlight on the disease by broadcasting her chemotherapy sessions on Facebook Live earlier this year. The sessions reached more than 20,000 people, and viewers asked her questions in real time. "I'm not typically a very public person," she says. "I came to realize, though, that by being open about my diagnosis and treatment, I was going to help so many more women."



Photo credit: Nancy Newby

Ovarian cancer is the most fatal women's cancer, claiming the lives of five Canadian women every day. "There's a lot of mystery behind cancer and chemotherapy. What we don't know is scary," she says. "By live streaming my chemotherapy, I could show what it looks like, explain how it feels, and show people it can be beaten."

Dr. Smith-Morris says her experience has given her a deeper understanding of both sides of cancer – as a patient and as a professional. "I feel as though fate has placed me in a very unique situation," she says. "As a pharmacist, I have a deep respect for the science and toxicity behind chemotherapy and cancer care, but to walk through the fire is something completely different."

Now, when working with cancer patients, Dr. Smith-Morris says she has a new perspective on cancer care, particularly when it comes to cancer-related fatigue. "I used to recommend good hydration and mild exercise — this is what expert guidelines suggest," she says. "After living through the fatigue myself, I can't even imagine if someone were to recommend mild exercise to me. You can hardly get out of bed."

She is also speaking at the Ovarian Cancer Canada Walk of Hope in Saskatoon this year, where she hopes her story will inspire others. The Walk is the only event in Canada to direct all attention and fundraising towards providing support, increasing awareness and funding vital research into ovarian cancer.

"The way we detect and monitor this disease is so archaic. There has to be a better way, we just need to support researchers to find it," she says. "The signs and symptoms aren't obvious. They're sneaky and subtle and this is why we lose so many brave and strong women."

"Ovarian cancer is terrifying, but it's not impossible to overcome," she says. "We do need to invest funding and it's up to us to spread the word so we can start saving our mothers, sisters, wives, aunties and friends."

Since starting in 2002, the Ovarian Cancer Canada Walk of Hope has raised more than \$23-million. This year's Walk will take place more than 35 locations across Canada, including Saskatoon at Windy Acres on September 10, 2017. For more information and to register, visit ovariancancerwalkofhope.ca