

## Our Town

# The Way to Wellness

By WENDY LEMUS, STAFF WRITER

Almost immediately following breast cancer surgery in 1999, Cary resident Debbie Bruck knew that something was not right.

Her left breast, which had undergone a lumpectomy, was swollen to about three times its normal size.

"I thought, 'this is disgusting, it's ugly, it's strange. I don't know what this is,'" Bruck recalled recently. Nobody knew what was going on. Not even the doctors who were treating her for cancer.

It was nearly a year before Bruck learned that she had lymphedema, a common condition that affects breast cancer survivors and others who have had surgery affecting the lymph nodes.

Lymphedema — or swelling of the arm, hand, breast or trunk — can occur following lymph node dissection or reconstructive surgery.

"Somehow," Bruck found a center in north Raleigh that offered programs to treat her condition.

Nearly six years later, she is still dealing with lymphedema. But she credits her rehabilitation therapists at Wellness One in Cary with helping her to manage it, every day.

The lymphedema moved from Bruck's breast to her left arm — a more common area for the condition to appear, therapists say — soon after she began therapy.

With massage treatments each week (and more often initially), daily self-massage at home, compression garments and other lifestyle changes, the mother and grandmother is coping with her lymphedema. Some days the swelling is worse than others.

"You don't want to stop living," Bruck said. "You don't want to be walking around worried all the time."

A major disruption

About 30 percent of breast cancer survivors will develop lymphedema, said Karen

Bienvenu, a licensed therapist at Wellness One in Cary who is trained in the Vodder Method of manual lymph drainage (MLD), which helps to alleviate swelling.

According to literature from Wellness One, the condition often develops within the first two years after surgery, but can occur even years later.

With breast cancer patients, the surgery-side arm is often affected because the surgery occurs in the upper body area. Legs can become swollen following treatments for cervical or prostate cancer, for example. Head and neck cancer surgery can cause swelling of the face and eyes.

Swelling can occur anywhere there are lymph nodes, Bienvenu said. She has also seen lymphedema in plastic-surgery patients and in men diagnosed with melanoma.

"There are ... men (who develop lymphedema) that don't know where to go" for treatment, she said.

The lymphatic system is vital to the body, carrying lymph fluid throughout. The fluid helps to process and filter about 10 percent of the body's waste — fatty acids, proteins,

bacteria, dead cells — that veins cannot handle.

When lymph nodes are removed or disrupted through surgery and radiation, swelling can occur.

Patients' extremities can swell to many times their normal size, which can be painful and embarrassing, and make it difficult to wear clothing.

"The more you remove the lymph nodes, the more potential for you to have (lymphedema); it makes perfect sense," Bienvenu said.

For instance, a patient who has undergone a radical mastectomy has a greater chance of developing the condition than a patient who has had a less invasive lumpectomy or modified mastectomy.

#### Management

Bienvenu said that understandably, patients facing breast cancer — or any kind of cancer — are focused on getting through surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

"The primary focus is in keeping you alive," she said. "But I think it is real important to at least know that something could happen (later on) and be prepared."

**Wellness** One offers free monthly lymphedema prevention and management classes for breast cancer patients in Cary and Raleigh. The classes teach patients how to prevent and detect symptoms of lymphedema; those who have the condition learn how to manage it.

Other than based on the type of surgery, it is difficult to tell who might develop symptoms and when, Bienvenu said. For the two-thirds of breast cancer survivors who do not get lymphedema, "sometimes the body adjusts," she said.

For some, lymphedema can be a lifelong condition — but one that can be improved and managed.

Seeking treatment early is key, Bienvenu said. If a patient goes years without treatment, fluid can develop into a hard "fibrotic" substance that is much more difficult to treat.

Bienvenu explained that when a trained therapist gently massages directly opposite the swollen area, fluids move to the "healthy" side of the body, where they can be processed by working lymph nodes.

"It takes time and effort. You're making collateral pathways," she said.

Many of the center's referrals come from oncologists.

At home, patients often wear compression bandages, sleeves and gloves to keep swelling down. Bruck does many of the things that she has been taught to do. She wears a compression sleeve on her arm and sometimes one on her hand if the swelling gets bad. She tries to drink plenty of water, and practices and teaches qigong, a Chinese self-healing art that includes movement and meditation.

Stretching, deep breathing and fluids are important maintenance steps, she said.

#### Anger to acceptance

Bruck said she has gone through the frustration, anger and resentment that many people with chronic or life-threatening illnesses experience. She has come to accept the lymphedema.

"This is something you're going to deal with. You just do it," she said.

But there is always that spark of hope that her condition will improve.

Friday, February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2005

---

In the meantime, Bruck avoids airplane rides, which cause a lot of swelling in her arm. She has to watch the physical activities she does with her left arm, such as lifting laundry or groceries. She still gardens, but not as much as she used to.

Bruck is either fortunate, rewarded for her daily wellness efforts, or a combination of both. The swelling in her arm is often minimal, its appearance noticeable only to her.

Her weekly massage treatments help a lot, she said.

She realizes that it could be worse.

Through meeting other patients at the Wellness One classes, "I know that I was much better off than a lot of other people," Bruck said.

But that does not make her day-to-day experience disappear.

Bruck said she wants people to be aware that if they are experiencing "aching, soreness or shooting pains" following breast cancer surgery, they might have lymphedema.

"You don't recognize these things until you experience them," she said.

Bienvenu is dedicated to helping people recognize the signs and manage the symptoms.

"That's why I'm a therapist, is quality of life. They have gone through all of this to live. I want to make sure they are really living the best they can," she said.

Contact Wendy Lemus at 467-3391 or [wlemus@nando.com](mailto:wlemus@nando.com)