

Local Cancer society needs volunteer drivers

By LORI TAYLOR
Herald staff writer

The Halton Hills branch of the Canadian Cancer Society is in desperate need of people who have some time to give.

The people of Halton Hills have been generous in the past with financial support of cancer research and services to cancer patients. Now residents have the opportunity to assist cancer patients by directly becoming volunteer drivers.

Merry Little, chairman of the service to patients committee of the cancer society, said the society needs at least six drivers, "but we'll take any number we can get."

"The more drivers we have, the less they have to drive," Mrs. Little said. Last year, drivers in Halton Hills made 758 single trips, and drove 31,620 miles transporting patients to various treatment centres in Toronto. Because Halton Hills is relatively close to the cancer treatment centres in the city, it is possible for the patients to live at home while receiving their treatments.

The Herald talked to Cynthia Green, a volunteer driver, and Jean Simmons, a cancer patient who had 60 radiation treatments, one a day, five days a week, and was able to live at home while getting treatment, because of the services of the volunteer drivers.

Mrs. Green was transportation convener for five years for the halton hills branch of the cancer society, and she is still a volunteer driver. She originally answered an advertisement in the Herald for volunteer drivers.

There is no selection process

for volunteer drivers, Mrs. Green said.

"If somebody volunteers, we accept them gratefully," she said. However, drivers should have insurance coverage on their car, because while the society has insurance to cover injuries suffered while a volunteer driver is driving patients, there is no insurance to cover damage to the vehicle.

Mrs. Green said she is still a volunteer driver because "you feel you're really doing something. You feel you're really helping, and it gives you a really good feeling."

The drivers are paid mileage expenses of 20 cents a mile, but receive no payment for their time. A trip may be over in two hours, or it may take all day, depending on the number of patients and the type of treatment.

"I feel guilty about taking that," Mrs. Green said. "Some drivers don't take it, but with gas prices the way they are, you pretty well have to. Some of the drivers take the cheques, but they make a substantial donation to the cancer society."

Cancer patients receive treatment at Princess Margaret Hospital, Toronto General or Sick Children's Hospital as a rule.

"When it's a child, you feel sad about it, but at the same time, you feel anything you can do to help and make them as comfortable as possible is all to the good," Mrs. Green said.

"It makes me feel I should not complain about anything," she added. "I've had patients say they feel the same way, that when they go down to the hospital, they're nervous and worried about themselves, but

when they see how badly off some people are, it makes them realize how well off they are."

Mrs. Green said as a rule, patients tend to be more talkative on the trip to the hospital for treatment and less interested in conversation on the way home. She said she asks them whether or not they would like the radio on and she looks for some pleasant music, "although there isn't much on the radio anymore."

"Generally people tell me if the doctor gives them a good report, and I've only had one lady who was really upset when she got a bad report," Mrs. Green said.

The patients sometimes don't feel well after a treatment, particularly towards the end of a course of treatments, Mrs. Green said, and on the way back they just want to rest.

Usually a driver will have more than one patient going down at a time, and they tend to cheer each other up, and keep their morale up, Mrs. Green said. The patients usually put on a good front, and they don't often talk about their fears about the disease, she said.

"Most of them are hopeful," she said. "It makes a real difference if you've got a positive attitude. I know a lady who was told in 1971 that she had a year to live, but she's still here, still fighting."

Mrs. Green said if the patients have to wait for another patient to conclude his or her treatment, she will often try to take them away from the hospital atmosphere, if they feel up to it. Once, during the warm weather, she and two patients went to the Allen Gardens. At other times, they will visit the lodge at Princess Margaret Hospital, where there is a library, a pool room and a cafeteria where tea, coffee and other refreshments are served.

Towards the end of a patient's series of treatments, they begin to feel ill, Mrs. Green said, and this can become distressing.

"I don't like to see people feeling ill, but at the same time I know I'm helping them," she said. "You know they aren't going to look well by the end of the treatment, but you know that's going to change."

Mrs. Green said the patients are for the most part very open in expressing their appreciation of the drivers' efforts, and she receives cards and letters from patients with whom she has become friendly.

One of those patients with whom she is still in contact is Mrs. Jean Symons, who learned in the fall of 1975 that she had cancer of the ovary. 1975

was not a good year for Mrs. Symons, as she had had a heart attack earlier in the year. The treatments she received for cancer took a greater toll on her health than most cancer patients.

"At first they thought I was pregnant, but after a while, they decided they better try some surgery, and they discovered cancer. I had a hysterectomy and then a series of radiation treatments," Mrs. Symons said.

Mrs. Symons had 60 treatments in all, one a day, five days a week, for over three months. The treatments were supposed to last for only three months, but Mrs. Symons was admitted to hospital around Christmas, 1975, because her platelet count was down. She had two weeks off from the treatments while she was in the hospital, and a few days after she returned home.

Mrs. Symons said that over the three months of treatments, she had had 17 different drivers driving through the winter weather.

"I don't know what I would have done without them, because I wasn't well enough to take a bus," she said. "My family wasn't able to take me all the time. They took me when they could. They took turns, and I had to rely on the drivers the rest of the time."

Mrs. Symons confirmed what Mrs. Green said, that the patients like to have someone to talk to on the way to the treatment centre, but that they prefer to rest quietly on the way home.

"I think it helped to talk.

The drivers were good that way," Mrs. Symons said. "If you wanted to talk, they'd listen. If not, it was okay."

"The drivers were really good," she added. "They were very obliging and helpful."

"I was so sick, I wasn't very cheerful," Mrs. Symons said when asked if she tried to keep up a good front. "I tried, but it's kind of hard to be cheerful at a time like that."

"You've sure got to fight," she said. "It's hard sometimes, you get so depressed when you get sick."

Mrs. Symons said she recalls a period when she was lying on a pouched egg a day, because it was all she could eat. There came a point where she weighed only 85 pounds, and she didn't have much strength. She said she lost some of her hair during the radiation therapy, but since her hair was thick, the loss was barely noticeable.

"There's nothing you can do except keep going from day to day," Mrs. Symons said. "You really appreciate things more, like a beautiful day."

"The weather was so bad," she continued, "but the drivers went out anyway. They didn't miss a day. It makes a difference in the progress of your treatment, to get in there every day."

"Mrs. Green was very nice to me," Mrs. Symons said. "They were all nice. I remember, when I was getting ready, there was a girl who died. She was only about 20 years old, and she'd been married for a year. The patients were really upset about it, and the drivers were too."

It will be four years ago in February that Mrs. Symons completed her treatments, and she goes back regularly for check-ups, sometimes being

driven by a cancer society volunteer.

"I get so nervous when I have to go down for check-ups, I hate going down, but that's the only way to have a chance," Mrs. Symons said.

"I'm very appreciative of what the drivers have done for me," she said. "They were really kind to me."

"It makes all the difference in the world when you can

come home to your family at night after your treatment, rather than staying in the hospital," Mrs. Symons said. "That way you don't have so much time to think."

Anyone who would like to volunteer to drive cancer patients can contact service to patients chairman Merry Little at 877-6255, or transportation convener Noreen McElhone at 877-1649.



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RED CROSS NEEDS BLOOD DONORS

Organizers of the Red Cross Blood Donor Clinic being held in Holy Cross auditorium next Monday between 1:30 and 8:45 p.m. are hoping Georgetown residents will turn out in sufficient numbers to offset a crisis situation which has developed in the Metro area Red Cross blood bank.


Officials claim the present shortage is the worst since the beginning of volunteer blood clinics. Only emergency and essential surgery can be performed at Metro hospitals and Red Cross is appealing to everyone eligible to attend local clinics. Although all types of blood are in demand, O blood is especially needed since it is the most common type.

Four Metro hospitals require A positive and O positive blood for 57 open heart surgery operations scheduled for the immediate future. A negative, AB positive and B positive are also much in demand.

To meet daily needs and stabilize reserves, clinics require 1,000 donors a day for at least two weeks. Georgetown donors usually supply at least half of one day's requirement.

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