Georgetown mom travels 'rough road' suffering from pulmonary hypertension

By LISA TALLYN
Staff Writer

Carol Doyle was like the majority of Canadians who had never heard of pulmonary hypertension (PH) until she was diagnosed two years ago with the rare incurable lung disease that results in high blood pressure in the lungs.

Unknown to her at the time, Doyle, 41, of Georgetown had been suffering symptoms of the disease for years before she was finally diagnosed.

"Over a period of four years, I went to my doctor and specialist countless times, but no one could figure out what was wrong," said Doyle. "When I was finally diagnosed my PH had significantly progressed. Had I received a prompt diagnosis, I could have been on the treatments I needed right away and managed my disease better."

The first symptoms she had, not knowing they were related to PH, started a few years back when she began experiencing blackouts.

"I would run upstairs and just black out," said Doyle. "I just fell wherever I was."

She was diagnosed with postural syncope, which occurs when a person's blood pressure drops due to a quick change in position.

A couple of years later she began suffering periods of severe bloating, and was prescribed diuretics.

In the sixth month of her pregnancy with her daughter a couple of years ago she started retaining fluid again, her feet and ankles became very swollen, and she was diagnosed with toxemia.

The fluid buildup continued after her daughter was born, and it was so bad that she was having difficulty walking.

She said the fluid continued to build up in her legs. She was in so much pain she went to Emergency, where she said the doctor told her, "it was part of motherhood and I should just learn how to deal with it."

The pain and swelling in her legs got progressively worse and due to exhaustion she was only able to climb the stairs in their home once a day.

Finally she was referred to Dr. Craig Browning in Georgetown, who immediately referred her to a cardiologist because he said there was a pulmonary issue.

"He was awesome," said Doyle.

The cardiologist diagnosed pulmonary hypertension. Doyle was told she needed a lung transplant, and if she didn't get one she wouldn't live past two years. She and her husband were devastated by the news.

Doyle was referred to a specialist at Toronto General Hospital who put her on heavy diuretics and did more testing.

"I lost 36 pounds the first week— seven pounds the first night," said Doyle. She felt significantly better with that fluid off.

"At least I could walk up and down the stairs," said Doyle.

At Toronto General she learned that lung transplantation is often the last treatment option, and was started on medications that increased blood flow and diuretics.

Since 1997 Health Canada has approved several new effective medications to treat PH patients.

See SUPPORT, pg. 5

When diagnosed with the chronic lung disease, pulmonary hypertension, Carol Doyle had problems climbing the steps in her home. With medication, she can now accomplish the task with daughter Aimee, 2. *Photo by Ted Brown*