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NEWS

TRANSPLANT OFFERS NEW HOPE

Continued from page 1

The local resident has tested positive for the anti-centrosome antibody (ACA), which her rheumatologist Dr. Ami Mody says is "very rare," has a female predominance and is associated with some inflammatory conditions like rheumatoid arthritis and chronic liver disease.

"Not only is ACA rare, but it has turned and started attacking my nervous system," said Bartolac. "That aspect of it is extremely rare."

Now, the chronically ill woman has been referred for a stem cell transplant and hopes to be accepted into the transplant program at the Ottawa Hospital.

Mody explained this procedure would reset Bartolac's immune system by wiping out the existing white blood cells and then injecting stem cells, which would repopulate the cells in her body, with the ultimate hope being that the inflammation-causing cells don't return.

The antibody discovery and potential treatment has renewed Bartolac's faith in a health-care system that has let her down time and time again over the past 13 years.

"My prognosis isn't good, but at least I have knowledge now, and with knowledge comes power," she said. "I went from not knowing what is destroying my nerves to now having the exact antibody that is doing it, and with that I was able to research things that I could try to slow this disease down, or completely restart my immune system."

But one thing does remain a medical mystery: there still isn't an overarching name that encompasses the multitude of symptoms Bartolac experiences.

"Basically she has a multi-system inflammatory disorder, with blood tests negative for specific common auto-immune conditions such as Lupus," said Mody.

She explained the inflammatory syndrome consists of fever, an enlarged liver, spleen and lymph nodes, joint inflammation and many different rashes.

Bartolac also has a progressive neuro-



Stephanie Bartolac photo
A mysterious face rash is among the host of symptoms that Stephanie Bartolac is battling.

"I realized that my disease and my story is my purpose - to help other people and families going through this because there are so many."

- Stephanie Bartolac

degenerative condition associated with increasing weakness and loss of abilities, which is believed to be linked to the anti-centrosome antibody.

This year also dished out other twists and turns in Bartolac's medical story. She qualified to begin receiving long-term palliative care at home to help her cope with the pain. She also landed in the hospital over the summer with what's known as an Addisonian crisis, which is described by those in the medical field as a life-threatening situation that results in low blood pressure, low blood sugar and high levels of potassium in the bloodstream.

But despite all of this, the local woman is persevering with a positive attitude that many might not expect, with social media serving as a journal of sorts that she hopes will help others enduring chronic pain and illness.

"This whole experience has shaped me and changed me. I realized that my disease and my story is my purpose - to help other people and families going through this because there are so many," she said.

"I've put my Facebook profile to public and have just started sharing. I want people to know that they're not alone, no matter how dark things may feel. People ask, how do you stay so positive? Because I've been in that darkness, and sometimes it takes something really bad for life to start turning around for you."

Bartolac's journey can be followed on Instagram under the user name stephanie-jeanbartolac.

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