

Learning to cope with disease is patient's biggest battle

By WILMA BLOKHUIS
Special to The Champion

Coping with illness is like learning to adjust to any event that changes your life, says Dr. Margaret Finch, whose specialty is adaptation to disease.

Illness affects each individual differently, she told the recent annual meeting of the Halton Lung Association held at Oakville's Briarwood Inn.

"Some experience changes in the body, sudden or gradual, which have an impact on what we can and can't do. Our body changes affect our feelings towards the illness," she says.

Dealing with emotions

Dr. Finch, who holds a Master of Science degree in nursing and a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Toronto, explained how people who are ill with a chronic disorder deal with their emotions.

She said the change in one's life brought on by chronic illness brings out an "overwhelm-

ing imbalance of reactions. It's like the panic we would feel if we were in an airplane and suddenly all of the oxygen masks dropped down at once. Or, it would come as a painful shock, like putting your hand on a hot burner.

"People react so quickly, she explained, that if a person in a doctor's office, clinic or hospital is told they have cancer, "then that word concerns the first and only word they hear, and nothing else."

Predicting people's "combination of reactions to disease" is difficult as each reacts differently according to their "perception of that situation, and not the situation itself."

Usually, the first reaction to consider is "what's at stake" as to personal harm or loss

of capabilities, followed by reviewing one's resources.

She likened it to the threat posed by a potentially volatile situation, like when "you're walking down a dark street and there are no street lights for the next half mile. You go half way and hear a noise in the bushes to the left behind you, and you don't know if it's a person or an animal. You ask yourself, how much strength do I have, how fast can I run, how hard can I hit? You will be surprised to find capabilities you didn't know you possessed."

Dr. Finch said people need to understand the situation they are facing before they can react appropriately.

change and manipulate their environment, but the challenge is whether to change the environment or yourself. People usually tend to change their environment first."

Quite often, coping requires a shift in one's personal goals. "Part of coping with chronic illness is finding ways to do what you want to do within your limitations."

Coping strategies

When dealing with the coping strategies of those who are ill, "they need to be very cognizant of what they believe their illness is about and what (consequences) they believe their illness is causing them," said Dr. Finch. "We should really try to understand what they would like to do instead of seeing the illness as a limitation."

"For me, often it's the individual with the illness who gives us the lead. They have the right to make decisions about their body and decisions about what happens to them. We have to understand how they feel about illness and what kinds of limitations it creates."



Dr. Margaret Finch

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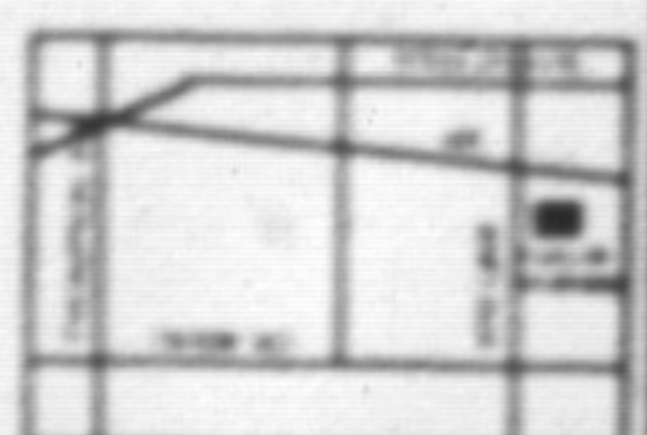
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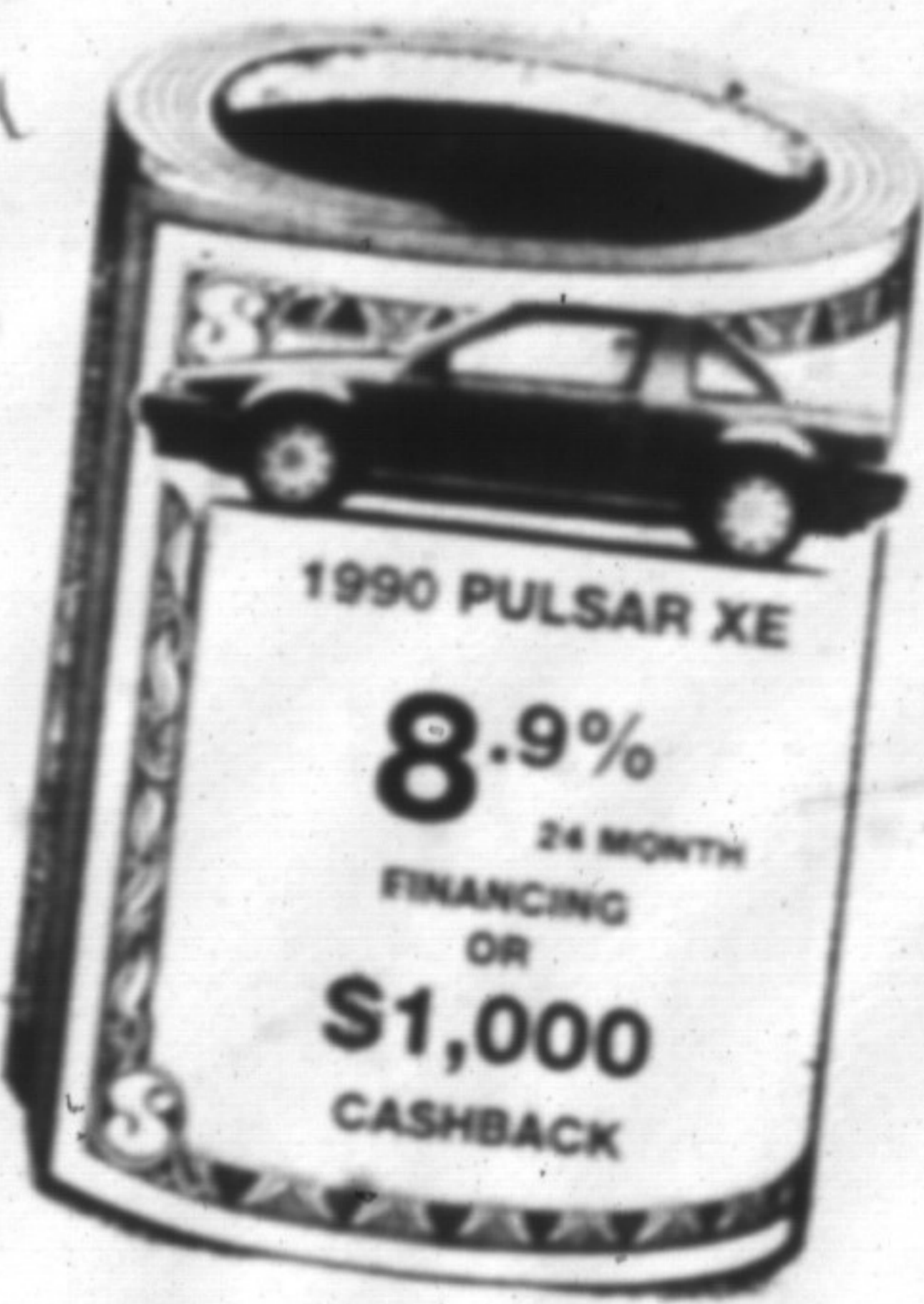
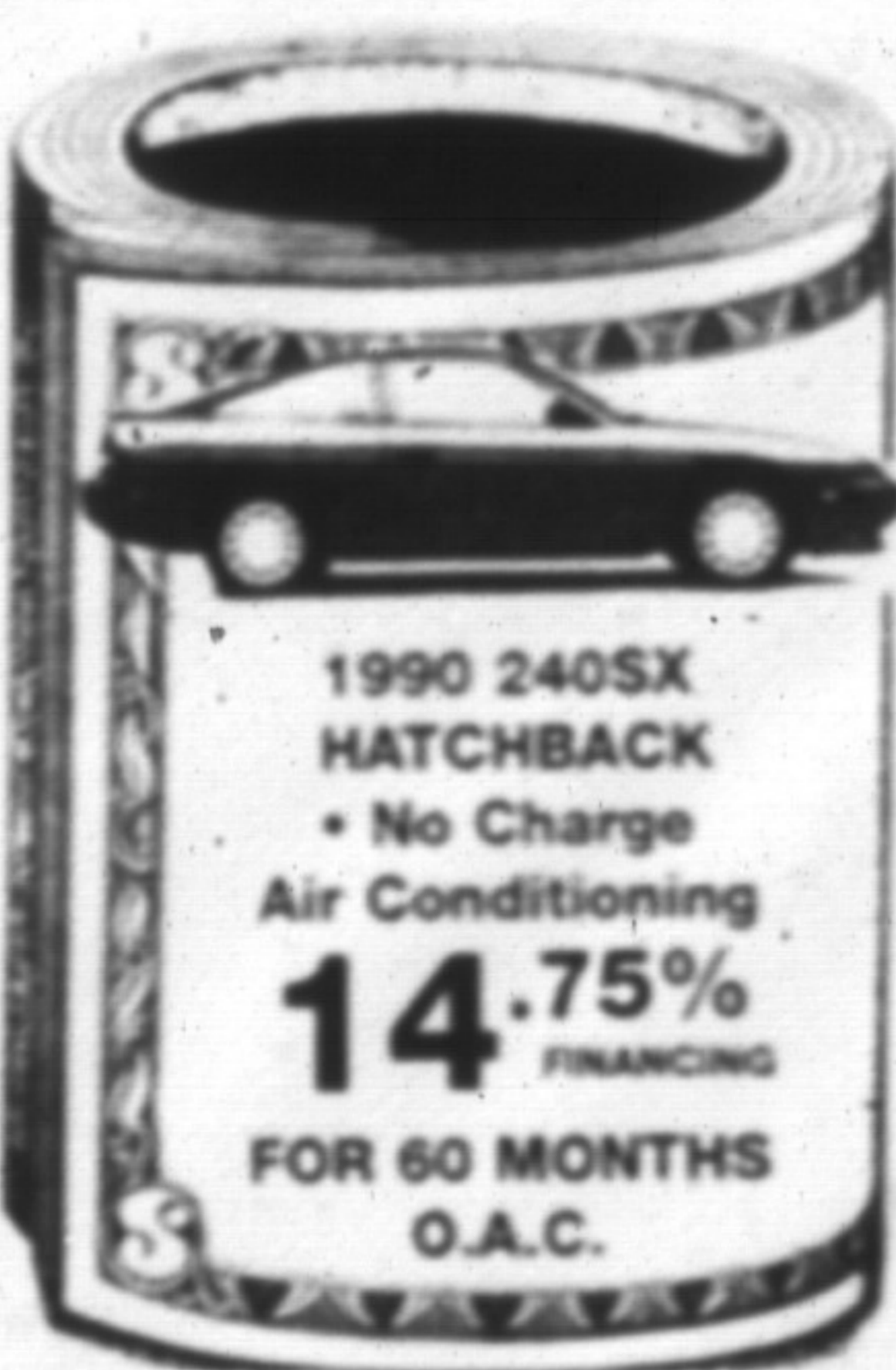
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