

NEWS RELEASE

Wilfrid Laurier
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Older breast cancer patients to benefit from research on CD-ROM

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WATERLOO — A professor whose research could help an all-but-ignored segment of breast cancer patients is now looking for more than 100 local survivors willing to share their experiences.

Dr. Paula Fletcher is hoping to recruit 130 women over the age of 55 who are willing to provide opinions, anecdotes and feedback that will determine what information needs to be included on a CD-ROM resource for breast cancer survivors. Health Canada has provided a \$60,000 research grant for the first phase of the project, designed to provide support to breast cancer patients whose needs have not been met.

"Generally, older women have not been focused on in terms of the health-promotion strategies for breast cancer recovery," said the professor of kinesiology and physical education. "Yet when we look at all women, those over 55 represent the largest segment of individuals with breast cancer. In addition, there are distinct needs particular to older women with breast cancer — things that relate to their physical, social and emotional well-being."

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Fletcher points to statistics which show that more women are having to live with breast cancer as the incidence rate rises and the mortality rate decreases. The numbers also show that the probability of developing breast cancer increases with age. A 40-year-old woman has a 0.4 percent chance of developing breast cancer. At 60 years of age, the likelihood climbs to 3.8 percent. And by the time a women reaches 80, the probability has reached 9.2 percent.

"As a woman advances in age, there's a greater probability that she will develop breast cancer," says Fletcher. "Over 78 percent of new cases appear in women over the age of 50."

As the probability of developing the disease grows, so too do the factors – physical, social and psychological – that can make dealing with a diagnosis all the more difficult. An older woman is more likely to experience other chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes or osteoporosis. She may also experience sensory or functional impairments that can hinder her ability to deal with the diagnosis.

In addition, an older patient may have to deal with the negative psychological effects of breast cancer at a time when she must also come to grips with the impact that aging can have on her self image. There is also an increased probability that she will be widowed and lack the support of a spouse.

Despite all the complications that aging can bring to breast cancer, Fletcher's early research has found no support material specifically for the target age group. "There's not really a lot of information for older women with breast cancer," she said. "If you look at the differences in terms of social, psychological and physical health – there should be information to help women over the age of 55."

Fletcher's current project aims to develop just such a tool. She hopes that the information she gathers from 100 surveys, 30 interviews and a series of focus group discussions will eventually lead to the creation of a comprehensive resource on CD-ROM. The disk would offer whatever support information proves most useful to the target group.

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Irvine River Mediaworks has agreed to work with local artists and musicians to develop a calming theme for the CD – perhaps a garden through which the patient could travel while learning how to survive breast cancer. And the disk would be structured so that the user could navigate the information by simply pointing and clicking with a mouse.

"The long-term goal is to develop a CD-ROM program," said Fletcher, "a health-promoting initiative to help older women deal with breast cancer, to bring them back to the highest wellness level that they can attain after being diagnosed with breast cancer."

Fletcher expects that the greatest challenge will involve finding 130 local survivors who are willing to share their experiences. Her hope is to find women who have accepted breast cancer to such a degree that they can discuss it freely.

"I think it's going to very much depend on each individual person," says Fletcher, "on where they are in their efforts to cope with breast cancer. I expect the big issue will be whether or not they've gained a sense of control."

A degree of control is what Fletcher hopes to offer other breast cancer patients over the age of 55.