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We need to share information about breast cancer

How do women who do not speak English communicate about their illness?

This question was asked by an elderly Cree woman while sharing her experiences with breast cancer.

Her words brought memories of my 97-year-old kokom who passed away several years ago. She had come to spend a month with me and on this particular morning I was going to take her to Eaton's to buy a new dress for a great grandchild's wedding.

I was finishing the breakfast dishes while she took her bath when she called me in to help her. I stopped mid-way into the bathroom.

The facecloth she was holding in front of her had slipped away. She was breastless, covered with thick ugly scar tissue and around the place where her breasts had been, there were what looked like huge black stitches.

"Oh my god kokom, what happened?" I was horrified. She grabbed the cloth and held it in front of her.

"The doctor cut them off a long time ago," she said. "I went to the hospital and after a few days they took me to this room and gave me a needle, when I woke up the first one was gone."

Three years later she got sick again and went back to the same hospital and the other breast was removed.

Sensing my guilt she explained that she didn't call us because she didn't want to bother anyone and that my uncle who looked after her was away working.

Then later she said she was too ashamed to tell him because "it was woman's stuff and she didn't want him to get mad at the doctor."

My kokom didn't speak English and so she didn't understand what was happening until she asked a Native cleaning woman at the hospital to speak to the doctor who told her she had breast cancer and that it was a good thing she was old and didn't need her breast anymore.

"He was right of course," she said, "but it was still very hard because I'm not a woman anymore not even an old lady. I'm just nothing."

I remember she laughed as she said this but even today my eyes fill with tears at the memory of the pain in her voice.

Recently I spent time with Carolyn Brooks, the co-coordinator of a project called "Visualizing Breast Cancer: Exploring Aboriginal Women's Experience."

Carolyn told me that Canadian women have a one in eight chance of being diagnosed with breast cancer and for Aboriginal women the number is even higher.

She said that according to a First Nations cancer care workshop report, cancer rates among Aboriginal peoples, while historically low are increasing dramatically for some cancers in some regions.

The report also states that survival rates are lower for Aboriginal populations compared to non-Aboriginal populations and this is especially evident in breast cancer in Saskatchewan.

I've lost friends and close relatives to this awful disease but I didn't realize the death rates were so high. I guess it's because as families we become isolated when someone is ill or even dying from cancer; however, we do need to ask ourselves why we as Aboriginal people are so silent and uninformed about this disease we know very little about, what resources are available to us and in particular to women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer.

We need to change that by doing all we can to make sure information and resources are available to our people which is what Carolyn Brooks is trying to do.

Working with two other women, they are inviting Aboriginal women who are breast cancer survivors to share their stories with the community.

These stories are important and can help other people as well as improve cancer care.

I invite you to call Carolyn at 220-0266 if you are a survivor.