BREAST CANCER CARE AS INDIVIDUAL AS EVERY WOMAN.
A NEW CLINIC WITH A NEW APPROACH TO COMPREHENSIVE CARE.

Heather Durcho was 25 years old and excited about starting a brand new job and a new career. But right before she was due to begin work, she received the news that she had breast cancer.

“When I heard that I had breast cancer, it was scary enough,” Durcho remembers. “But when I started to think about juggling everything else in my life, it really felt overwhelming.”

However, Durcho had a new resource to balance her busy life and new diagnosis: The Breast Cancer Specialty Care Clinic at Magee-Womens Hospital of UPMC. The “one-stop” feature of this Clinic enabled Heather to keep moving forward with her life, her career and her treatment. “My day at the clinic wasn’t the most fun day I’ve ever had, obviously. But it was really nice that it was only one day when my husband and I had to take off work. The appointments weren’t scattered all over the place at different location and weeks apart.”

Out of every 100,000 women diagnosed with breast cancer, 200 of them will be under the age of 50. And while that number may sound small, the repercussions can be quite significant. “It’s often a more aggressive type of cancer in premenopausal women,” says Judy Herstine, Program Administrator for Women’s Cancer Services at Magee. “Every woman under the age of 45 who’s been diagnosed with breast cancer should have genetic counseling and determine if they need genetic testing. The younger you are with breast cancer, the more risk there might be that it’s genetic. That has implications for the patient’s treatment and also for her family.”

Being diagnosed at a young age comes with other challenges, as well.

“These women are diagnosed at a stage when they are extremely productive in society,” says Dr. Emilia Diego, Director of the Premenopausal Breast Cancer Program at Magee. “They are mothers. They are in the work force. They are friends, sisters, and an integral part of society. Maybe they just got a promotion or a new job. How are you going to tell your boss you’re going to take time off to get cancer treatment when you’re trying to climb that corporate ladder? How do you tell your kids about your diagnosis? These are all issues that can be psychologically distressing. The demographic is such that, because of their disease, there will be a lot of considerations that may not be quite as apparent in older patients, including the loss of work and the loss of time that they contribute to their family life.”
"We'd been working with the Glimmer of Hope Foundation for a number of years," says Herstine, "The Breast Cancer Specialty Care Clinic is just one of the aspects of what they're doing. We couldn't have done the pilot and invested the resources and physician time if Glimmer of Hope hadn't given us funding."

-Judy Herstine, Program Administrator for Women's Care Services at Magee

All of this impacts the way treatment is given and the kind of support these young women need. For instance, if a woman is diagnosed during the childbearing age, reproductive fertility comes under consideration. Chemotherapy can affect fertility and women may opt to have their eggs harvested before starting treatment.

Plus, finding health care professionals who understand the impact of a diagnosis on the family is crucial to patients. "We call women who overcome breast cancer 'survivors.' But family members have survived the whole treatment process as well. So we designate them with the term 'co-vivors,'" says Diego. "There is a psychological impact, not only on the patient, but on everyone who satellites around that patient."

A Glimmer of Hope. And the creation of a new clinic.

In order to better meet the needs of these young women and their families, Magee created the Breast Cancer Specialty Care Clinic with funding from Glimmer of Hope, a Pittsburgh organization dedicated to supporting young women with breast cancer. Glimmer of Hope Founder and Executive Director Diana Napper was personally affected when a close friend died of breast cancer. She has made it her mission to create clinics such as this. "Young women have different concerns and needs," says Ms. Napper. "They're balancing more everyday living with a devastating illness. We find it to be a whole different disease when it strikes someone who's premenopausal. There might be one or two other clinics in the country like this one. So for Pittsburgh to offer this – it's impressive."

Through a line of jewelry that Napper herself designed, and through meet-and-greet fundraisers with high profile Steelers such as Heath Miller, Brett Keisel, Alan Faneca and their wives, Glimmer of Hope has raised $3 million since it started in 1994. Napper feels her organization is successful because people in Pittsburgh like to see that their money impacts the community they live in. "We show people that it strikes someone who's premenopausal. There might be one or two other clinics in the country like this one. So for Pittsburgh to offer this – it’s impressive."

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Herstine adds, "With them, we pulled together a focus group of young women who had breast cancer. We talked to the women about their experience and what they thought would make it better. We got their opinions about what we should do and shouldn’t do with a clinic. From that point, we started a pilot program. After a year, we officially started the Breast Cancer Specialty Care Clinic."

How the clinic works. And works well.

"Our mission is to be able to pull all the resources together to make it more efficient and comprehensive for our patients," says Herstine. "We've designed this clinic so that they can get quick access to a genetic counselor and to testing if that's needed. We have surgical consultation with plastic and reconstructive surgeons. We have reproductive endocrinologists and infertility specialists, medical oncologists, radiation oncologists, clinical trials, and patient navigators. The clinic is designed so that it's almost a one-stop approach where you can get all those consultations done in one day. All those experts sit together and develop a plan of care for that patient, so when the patient leaves the clinic that day she knows if she's going to have radiation oncology and where it's going to be. She knows if she's going to have plastic surgery. She knows if she's going to have chemotherapy. She has all this done at once, as opposed to having to go to different specialists at different days."

Dr. Diego adds, "At at day in the Clinic, they will see the specialists that will be involved in their care. On average, most patients see at least five practitioners. That's five times they would have had to get out of work and drive to a hospital – days lost to productivity and perhaps having to take family members with them."

Access to clinical trials is another reason why the Clinic is so important. "One of the members of the team is a clinical research coordinator," Diego says. "So when the case is being discussed and the multi-disciplines are talking about the best treatment plan, we are also consciously exploring whether or not these patients are eligible for any clinical trials that we have open at Magee."

Currently, the Breast Cancer Specialty Care Clinic is open every first and third Friday of the month. Appointments are scheduled so patients can meet with everyone they need to see in one day. "Clearly, most patients find it overwhelming to get a lot of information from a several providers," says Diego. "But it's very beneficial. They get all the information in one setting, and most are satisfied that they are going home with a plan. The psychological impact of having to deal with something that's scary and unknown is far more difficult than having to deal with something scary when there is a plan in place. It makes the process easier to get through."

Since the Clinic was initiated in 2014, it has offered 16 clinic dates, seeing about four patients per day. "We've managed to serve 55 women in this setting. I'm hoping to ramp that up," states Diego. "On average at Magee, we see about 1,200 breast cancer patients a year. Three hundred of those patients, or about 20%, will be under the age of 50. That's another 250 women we could be serving."
"We've done patient satisfaction surveys for all of our patients and the vast majority are pleased with the care they received. If these programs are successful and we see patient results improving because their care was tailored for them, then it would become protocol across the country for young women," says Herstine. "It wouldn’t just be Pittsburgh we were impacting, we would impact young women everywhere."

To support research that makes a difference for young women with breast cancer, visit www.mageewomens.org.

A Glimmer of Hope is a Pittsburgh-based breast cancer foundation started by Diana Napper in 1994. Diana began Glimmer of Hope to honor the wishes of her best friend, Carol Jo Weiss Friedman, who lost her battle with the disease in 1990. Diana promised that she would pursue her dream as a jewelry designer and open a jewelry business that would fund a hospice in Carol Jo’s name.

As the dream evolved, Diana realized that her mission was to create a venue to support breast cancer patients and their loved ones. With that as her goal, the Glimmer of Hope Foundation was born, www.symbolofthecure.com.

Through fundraising efforts such as jewelry sales and special events, Glimmer of Hope has donated more than $3 million to breast cancer projects and has received tremendous support because of the transparency of the programs it supports, the satisfaction people receive from seeing their contributions at work, and the knowledge that the funds raised stay in Pittsburgh.

Here are just a few of the initiatives the Glimmer of Hope has helped to fund at Magee:

- Genetic counseling and testing for young women concerned or recently diagnosed with breast cancer
- Patient navigator to assist younger women through a myriad of choices and steps during treatment
- Breast Cancer Specialty Care Clinic
- C-View software to advance the use of 3D mammography
- Patient Resource Center and Family Lounge in the Radiation Oncology Department at Magee-Womens Hospital of UPMC
- Integrative Medicine Services: Acupuncture
- Massage therapy
- Premenopausal research projects at Magee-Womens Research Institute

Hope for the future.

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Napper’s dream-come-true would be to see these clinics all over the country. And while that may be in the future, right now the clinic at Magee is making a big difference.

"We’ve done patient satisfaction surveys for all of our patients and the vast majority are pleased with the care they received," says Herstine. "It saves them five or six trips to different doctors. It’s a long day, but we also have a nurse coordinator who is a first contact for the patient and helps them navigate through the process. What people don’t realize when they have breast cancer is that it’s such an individualized disease. There’s not one kind of breast cancer, and you really have to approach it from an individual perspective. Lots of different things matter. People are usually amazed at that — that it’s such an individual disease. You can’t just treat it the same for everyone."

Kelly Tremel was another patient of the Clinic who quickly realized the benefits that this model of care had for her whole family. As a busy 35-year old Pharmacy Technician, wife, and mother of three young boys who are involved in sports, the Clinic enabled her to manage her care with the least possible disruption to the rest of her life. “After my diagnosis, I was looking to get a plan in place and attack this cancer. I chose Magee as it was highly recommended from a breast cancer survivor that I knew. I had to travel two hours to get to Magee so it was great to have all my appointments in one day. My husband and I left that day after meeting with the doctors at the clinic feeling that we had a solid plan in place, and that we were definitely in the right place with the right people. I didn’t need to take off several days, even though I was able to meet with a number of doctors and nurses.”

Heather Dursch also recommends this to other young women facing a breast cancer diagnosis. "You get in. And you get out. And you have all your questions answered and can get moving on with your treatment plan. Everything was laid out in front of us for the next few months. There were less questions than if I had just met with one doctor. It’s a long day but you leave there completely informed. Even though I was just starting my treatment, I still felt like I could take a sigh of relief just knowing exactly what I was facing. Instead of running here and there to see different specialists, I felt like everyone came to one location on one day, just for me."

Diego goes on to explain why the number of young women with breast cancer coming to Magee is so high. "Magee is a tertiary care clinic. We are well known in cancer care and are a big referral center, not just in the region but also across the country. Patients who find themselves in these special situations seek special care, and Magee is able to deliver that."

Herstine adds, “Because we’re a women’s hospital, we have the reproductive endocrinology and infertility specialists right here, which other places don’t have. We have cancer genetic specialists here, too. And because of our relationship with the Women’s Cancer Research Clinic, we have the research here, as well. We have an extensive patient navigation service, dedicated specialists in breast imaging, breast surgery, plastic and reconstructive surgery, medical oncology, and radiation oncology. Our medical oncologists and breast surgeons spend all of their time doing breast cancer work, so that’s very focused.”

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