

## **Martha's Monthly September 2006 Slaying the Dragon of unfair cancer treatment**

This summer Martha did something she had not done before. She joined a dragon boat team. It was one of those things she'd frequently thought of doing because it looked so fun and, well, sisterly. And how tough could it really be, right? WOW! Martha was amazed how tough it was. But she loved it. Then she found out why Dragon Boating is associated so strongly with breast cancer survivors and she *really* loved it.

Martha found out that ten years ago a sports medicine physician at the University of British Columbia named Dr. Don McKenzie launched a group of breast cancer survivors in a dragon boat to test the myth that repetitive upper-body exercise in women treated for breast cancer encourages **lymphedema**. (Lymphedema is a swelling in the arms and chest that occurs in 40% of breast cancer survivors as a result of radiation or surgery. It is a life-long condition and can be anything from uncomfortable to deadly)

Dr. McKenzie proved that not only did repetitive upper body exercise not cause lymphedema, it *actually could reduce it somewhat*. That first team of dragon boaters, named Abreast In A Boat, started the amazing phenomenon that spread across the country. Many of the women who now participate in dragon boating are not cancer survivors but teams like Abreast in A Boat have popularized a great sport and helped improve the lives of breast cancer survivors in the process. (To read more about the history of dragon boats see: [Abreast website](#) and [CBC in-depth report](#) on breast cancer and exercise)

So Martha was still sweating after her dragon boat experience when, on August 15<sup>th</sup>, a couple of Calgary women, both breast cancer survivors, went on the news to talk about their struggle with lymphedema. The symptoms of lymphedema are tough (see [Cancer Society website](#)) but they weren't complaining about that. These women were concerned that women in southern Alberta were getting different treatment than those in northern Alberta. Women served by Tom Baker Cancer Centre (nearly anyone living south of Red Deer) **had to pay** for their treatment for lymphedema while those served by Cross Cancer Centre in Edmonton had the treatment covered. (See: [CBC story](#))

The private treatment costs are high. A one-hour treatment of specialized massage costs between \$60 and \$75 from the few private therapists that are trained to offer it. Most lymphedema sufferers need about 10-20 sessions of treatment. Some need more. One of the women at that news conference, Beth Wiwchar, told the media it was so costly she had to quit the treatments after only five sessions.

Martha called up Beth Wiwchar to see how she could help. Beth is a force! She'd already organized a petition, which on August 30<sup>th</sup> was presented with 335 names on it, to the Alberta Legislature by MLA Ray Martin of the NDP (see the story on [Ray Martin's website](#).) Beth's main concern is to make sure that every woman in Alberta has access to the same level of care in her fight against breast cancer. It is just a no-brainer for Martha. **Of course every woman in Alberta should have the same access to care, regardless of her address or income.**

But what do you think the Alberta government has said about this? Well, in initial reports (like the CBC one above) the Alberta Cancer Board spokesman said Tom Baker Cancer Centre is just too full to offer these services. Later, government spokespeople offered to begin funding lymphedema treatment in Calgary but to a maximum of 10 treatments.

Lethbridge East MLA Bridget Pastoor, a Liberal, brought up another aspect of this cancer related issue in a statement on August 30<sup>th</sup> in the Alberta Legislature. She asked the government to open satellite radiation treatment centers so that the 28% of Albertans who don't live in Calgary and Edmonton can access cancer treatment closer to home. In Lethbridge, a petition to get radiation offered locally garnered 15,000 petitions last year. If you live in Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Grande Prairie, Fort McMurray or any other smaller centre in Alberta you have to travel for radiation treatment AND you have to pay for lymphedema treatment privately.

So here is the dragon of the whole thing: even if the Calgary Health Region does begin to cover the limited number of treatments they have promised, where does that leave the 28% of Albertans who are not living in Calgary or Edmonton? It quite simply leaves them to pay for their lymphedema treatment. Or like Beth Wiwchar had to do: stop paying and suffer.

Martha says “**paddles up**” to all the Marthas out there. It is time to slay this dragon of unfairness and see that every woman in Alberta that gets lymphedema gets her treatment paid for by the **public purse and not the one hanging over her swollen arm**. It is time to write to Minister of Health Iris Evans and demand fair treatment. Use the template below and add your thoughts OR write a letter of your own (it is much more effective). Copy the following addresses in to your TO: line so you can email the letter to Minister Iris Evans, Liberal Health critic Laurie Blakeman and NDP Health Critic Ray Martin. [iris.evans@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:iris.evans@assembly.ab.ca), [edmonton.centre@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:edmonton.centre@assembly.ab.ca), [edmonton.beverlyclareview@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:edmonton.beverlyclareview@assembly.ab.ca), [marthasmonthly@yahoo.ca](mailto:marthasmonthly@yahoo.ca)

Those Marthas who have copied the letter to their own MLA (check [here](#) to find out the address) have also had some interesting responses.

September 8, 2006

Dear Minister Evans:

I am one of the Marthas of Martha's Monthly and I am writing to you about the unbalanced care for women in Alberta who have lymphedema following breast cancer treatment.

I was very shocked to learn that women in Calgary have had to pay for their treatments while women in Edmonton have not. While the Calgary Health Region has just made a promise to begin offering limited lymphedema treatment this month, that still leaves more than ¼ of the province's breast cancer survivors without publicly funded treatment because they do not live in either Calgary or Edmonton.

It is not acceptable for breast cancer survivors to have to pay for their treatment for lymphedema as lymphedema strikes 40% of them and is a life-long condition. Every survivor with lymphedema should have access to publicly funded treatment, regardless of her address or her income.

I ask that you immediately begin to cover lymphedema treatments for all Albertans and review any other differential service levels in the province. I find it unacceptable that coverage for treatments like this one are not universal across the province.

Sincerely,

Your name and full address (or it doesn't get counted!)

CC    MLA Laurie Blakeman  
      MLA Ray Martin