The power of the narrative

Recently, I was struck once again by the power of the narrative—the insight we can gain from an individual story. So often in our cancer world we are told to pay attention to the latest randomized clinical trial with sample sizes in the hundreds. Yet the insight, the learning, which can come from one person's story can be profound.

At the recent CANO/ACIO Conference held in Prince Edward Island, two presentations focused exclusively on sharing patient/survivor stories.

One was a panel of five survivors who had worked with Mike Lang, a Health Narrative Specialist from Alberta. (You can watch one of Mike’s recent digital storytelling projects here: www.storiesforcaregivers.com/project/4M) Mike is a cancer survivor himself and currently working on his PhD. The presentation was similar to a talk show where Mike interviewed each survivor after we had watched a short film telling their cancer story. They had produced these films during a two-day workshop just prior to the conference.

Each survivor’s story was unique and offered insight regarding the impact of their cancer diagnosis and treatment and how their journey unfolded. In turn, each had been motivated through their experiences to serve as a volunteer with the Canadian Cancer Society to give back and support others. Each story illustrated how, in the midst of this life-changing event, the smallest show of support can have a profound impact.

If you want to watch the story videos yourself, you will find them on the Canadian Cancer Society website.

The second presentation was a keynote address by Maike van Nierker. This young nurse lost her mother to breast cancer when she was 15 years old. Never in her wildest dreams did she think the cancer would take her mother from her. We heard about her subsequent journey through nursing school after she saw the difference nurses made for her mother. She also had some incredible experiences setting up a foundation (Katrin’s Karepackage) and engaging in rather awesome fundraising activities to provide funds for cancer patients who had to travel for radiation treatment in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. Her motivation has clearly come from wanting to honour her mother and her battle against cancer.

Recently, Maike published a book presenting stories and pictures of 50 cancer survivors and caregivers from across Nova Scotia. It is entitled, Faces Facing Cancer, and is an incredible testament to the resilience people discover in the face of adversity. It also illustrated how the cancer journey is unique in so many ways for each individual and what they found to be supportive varies.

Every individual who is diagnosed with cancer, and every family member or friend, has a story to tell. That story offers insight about the person and his or her motivation to cope with the illness and its aftermath. If we take the time to listen, we will find the path to supporting them in relevant and meaningful ways.

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