

Paulette Sawaya — Living Well with Cancer?

New Treatment Makes it to the Clinic

Paulette Sawaya's battle with cancer started innocently in early 2003, when she noticed lower abdominal pains and cramps. She saw a doctor and underwent a battery of tests, none of which found a cause for her pains.

In June of 2003 Mrs. Sawaya had a colonoscopy, which screened for cancer. The procedure revealed a cancerous tumor measuring one and a half inches, which was promptly removed. But additional tests indicated that the cancer had spread to the liver.

"It was such a difficult time for her and her husband! We sat down, put our heads together, and discussed all possible options. I carefully answered their many specific and intelligent questions. We also connected emotionally," Dr. Tchekmedyan explains.

She embarked on a course of chemotherapy with a recently approved drug, Oxaliplatin, in combination with two well-known active medications, 5-FU and leucovorin. She responded well, and scans revealed her tumors were shrinking.

As she finished the initial course of chemotherapy in February of 2004, the FDA gave its much-anticipated approval of the drug Avastin™, an angiogenesis inhibitor. Avastin™ inhibits new blood vessels that are essential for tumors to grow and spread.

"While many other clinics and hospitals were starting to use Avastin™ for the first time, our team was already very familiar with it because, during the previous two years, we participated in the drug's clinical trials," Dr. Tchekmedyan said. "In fact, we discussed Avastin™ with Mrs. Sawaya well before the drug's approval, and began using it in conjunc-



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tion with standard chemotherapy as soon as it became available," Dr. Tchekmedyan adds. "During our two years experience, we became aware of the risk of blood clots as a side effect of Avastin™. As a precaution, right from the outset, we started her on blood thinners to prevent this problem."

There are advantages to having a team of doctors who are active participants in clinical research trials. By being at the cutting edge of clinical cancer research, doctors have first-hand knowledge and experience with the newest treatments before these medications become part of clinical practice. This helps incorporate new therapies quickly, efficiently, and safely into practice. Patients and families are less anxious when they know that their doctors have experience with the treatment to be given.

"Mrs. Sawaya is so far tolerating her treatments well. Her cancer is in a remission. She remains very active, and her liver tests are normal," says Dr. Tchekmedyan.

"Her experience illustrates the small but steady steps we are making towards controlling cancer, even when it spreads. Patients diagnosed with cancer today benefit from recent clinical research results. These results would not be possible without the previous participation of patients with similar conditions in clinical trials. The quality of her life and the ability to be physically active are essential to Mrs. Sawaya. The new treatment allows her to have a very active lifestyle."

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Quality of life was not to be compromised – I hardly thought cancer and quality of life could go hand in hand. It was a remarkable day when I came to Pacific Shores Medical Group for my consultation. Several other doctors had already informed me that I would require treatment, specifically chemo! However, they lacked the ability to explain, to comfort and to help me make the best decision. I was scared and convinced that I would not undergo chemotherapy. After all, I was healthy, active and did not even look sick! My biggest fear was losing the ability to be physically active.

I felt comfortable at Pacific Shores Medical Group. The Huntington Beach office is so pleasant; Cheryl and Sharon are amazing. After listening to Dr. T explain the drugs in detail, their side effects and the possible benefits, I finally felt as though I could make an informed, educated decision. I was looking for something a little less aggressive than chemotherapy. Dr. Tchekmedyan mentioned Avastin™ would be available to me in a couple of months. The drug sounded promising – a good way to fight, I thought.

I now focus more on life as it is today, I garden, do yoga and pray daily. Now I know that quality of life and cancer can go hand in hand. ~ Paulette Sawaya