



STACY'S STORY: HOW GENETIC TESTING HELPED HER MAKE THE DECISION OF A LIFETIME

When Stacy Zelazny first felt a lump in her breast, she didn't think too much of it. There was no history of breast cancer in her family, and she was only in her mid-30s — too young to even qualify for a mammogram.

The married mother of two decided to wait until her annual physical to bring it up to her family doctor, who ordered a biopsy just to be on the safe side.

“The rapid genetic test allowed me to make the decision to be as preventative as possible. I'm so grateful.”

A week later, the results came in: Stacy had invasive breast cancer.

Shocked, Stacy began discussing her treatment options with her care team. She was advised that genetic testing for the BRCA1 or BRCA2 genetic mutations — which significantly increase a person's risk of developing cancer in both breasts — would help her decide whether to undergo a simple lumpectomy or opt for a bilateral mastectomy. For the average woman with breast cancer, there is no survival benefit associated with a bilateral mastectomy. But, for women who are found to have a BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene mutation, bilateral mastectomy can reduce the risk of dying of breast cancer by 50%.

The only problem? Genetic testing traditionally requires a referral to a regional cancer genetic clinic for genetic counselling, and a blood sample for genetic testing. It can take months to get an appointment and to get results back — time Stacy didn't have to waste.

“That's when my oncologist told me that Women's College Hospital was offering rapid genetic testing by mail,” says Stacy, who lives in a rural town in Ontario. “We enrolled, they mailed me a saliva test, and I sent it back right away. Within days, they called to tell me I'm a BRCA2 mutation carrier.”

The knowledge empowered Stacy to elect for a bilateral mastectomy — the removal of both breasts. “The rapid genetic test allowed me to make the decision to be as preventative as possible in my care plan,” she says.

First launched in 2018 by the Familial Breast Cancer Research Unit at Women's College Research Institute, the test that saved Stacy's life is part of a national study aimed at providing all women access to genetic testing at the time of cancer diagnosis — a first-of-its-kind initiative that's helping people across Canada access genetic testing where and when they need it most.

“Had I not known about this study, I don't want to think about what my journey would have looked like,” she reflects. “It brings me to tears to think I could have left my children without a mother. I'm so grateful.”

Every Breast Counts co-creators. L-R: Talina Higgins, Debbie Pottinger, Dawn Barker, Shireen Spencer



EVERY BREAST COUNTS: CANCER INFORMATION FOR BLACK WOMEN, BY BLACK WOMEN

In Canada, Black women may be significantly less likely than white women to access cancer screening, undergo genetic testing for cancer risk, or opt for breast reconstruction surgery after mastectomy — realities that are putting the lives of Black women at risk or reducing their quality of life following a cancer diagnosis.

Dr. Aisha Lofters, Chair of Implementation Science at Women's College Hospital's Peter Gilgan Centre for Women's Cancers, in partnership with the Canadian Cancer Society, says that a lack of education and awareness initiatives designed specifically with Black women in mind is a major factor preventing them from accessing life-saving care.

“Most materials and supports about cancer care are not representative of Black women or the unique experiences they often face along their cancer care journey,” says Dr. Lofters. “As a result, far too many Black women feel alienated from the health care system or ill-equipped to approach conversations about cancer care — often until it's too late.”

To help address this life-threatening education gap, in 2021 Dr. Lofters and her team co-created a new web-based resource hub for accurate, evidence-based, and community-relevant cancer information specifically curated for Black women, by Black women.

The hub, called Every Breast Counts, was developed in close partnership with four co-creators and The Olive Branch of Hope, a cancer survivorship and advocacy group for Black women. The webpage is now being shared broadly across the health system through policymakers, primary care physicians and community partners.

“Through Every Breast Counts, our ultimate goal is to save the lives of as many Black women as possible by sharing information that helps Black women feel heard, seen, and represented throughout their cancer care,” says Dr. Lofters.



Scan to visit
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Counts!



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If you have any feedback about this issue of Women's Now, questions about donating or simply want to connect with a member of your Foundation staff team, please contact **Alex Cheesman** at alex.cheesman@wchospital.ca or 416-323-6323 ext. 2319.

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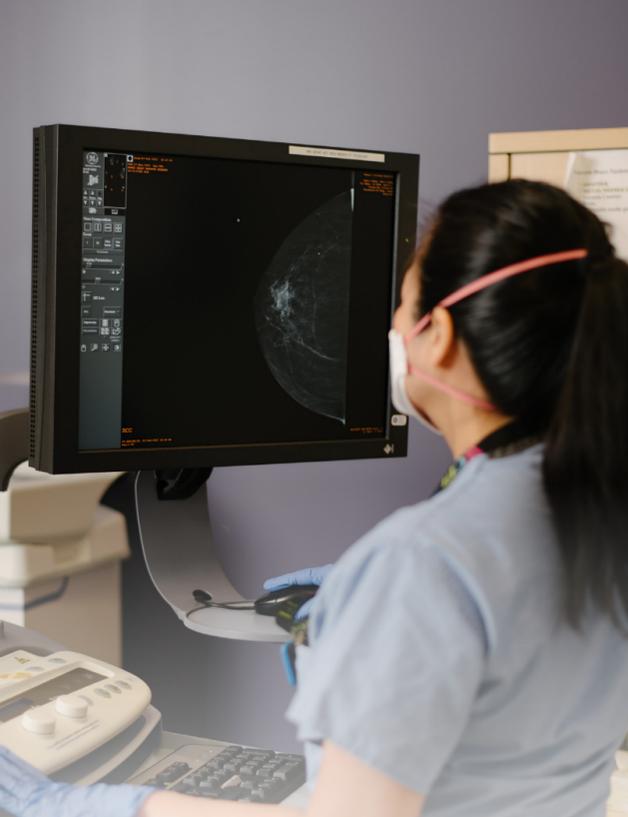


SPRING 2022

INSIDE

New equipment is coming to the Breast Centre – thanks to you!





“Regular mammogram testing should only take about 15 minutes per patient, but every time a machine stalls, it could potentially delay patient appointments drastically, leading to longer waiting room times,” says Corwin. “This aging equipment is slower than newer machines and can add an additional five minutes to every mammogram appointment. Our priority is to ensure patient safety and get the clearest image.”

The urgently-needed new machines — consisting of four mammography machines and four ultrasound machines — offer leading-edge technology that will significantly advance Women’s College Hospital’s impact as a world leader in breast cancer care.

“The new machines will allow us to achieve the highest quality images possible in the shortest amount of time while giving our radiologists the best information to make a diagnosis,” says Corwin.

The team anticipates that with the new machines in place, they will be able to conduct over 6,500 screenings per year, up from the current capacity of 5,400 — meaning the department’s appointment backlog could be fully addressed in two years instead of five.

And with one of the ultrasound machines dedicated to research, the arrival of the new equipment will also empower new discoveries in breast cancer imaging and diagnostics that hold the potential to save countless lives.

With equipment needs not directly supported by government contributions, Women’s College Hospital is relying on funds raised by generous community members to enable the purchase of these state-of-the-art new machines.

And we’re thrilled to share that every dollar donated in support of the equipment will now have double the impact: FDC Foundation, one of Canada’s leading philanthropic foundations, has committed to match up to \$2 million in donations towards the purchase of the new mammography and ultrasound machines!

“Even the smallest donation in support of this urgent need will help us acquire these new machines — a goal that will impact our friends, family, neighbours, and children for many generations to come,” says Corwin.

WITH YOUR SUPPORT: NEW IMAGING EQUIPMENT FOR WOMEN’S

With generous support from the community, urgently needed and life-saving new diagnostic equipment for breast cancer screening is planned to arrive at Women’s College Hospital this fall.

With a total cost of \$4.1 million, the new equipment represents one of the hospital’s most critical needs. At 14 years old, the Breast Centre’s existing mammography and ultrasound machines are reaching the end of their lifespan and regularly requiring fixes and support — causing many appointments to be delayed or rescheduled.

Corwin Burton, Women’s College Hospital’s Clinical Manager of Diagnostic Imaging, says that the equipment is making it challenging for the imaging team to keep up with skyrocketing demand for testing — especially as women head back to the clinic after breast cancer screening rates in Ontario plummeted by 97 per cent during the pandemic.



BREAST CANCER AND HEART HEALTH: HOW ARE THEY RELATED?

In Canada, breast cancer is the most common type of cancer in women while heart disease is the leading cause of death for women over the age of 55.

They’re very different illnesses — but they’re more closely connected than many women and their physicians previously realized.

Thanks to research from Dr. Husam Abdel-Qadir at Women’s College Research Institute, awareness of the relationship between breast cancer and heart disease is rapidly increasing — along with lives saved.

A cardiologist and scientist at WCH, Dr. Abdel-Qadir is exploring the impact of certain types of breast cancer treatments on women’s heart health.

“About one in five women diagnosed with breast cancer require a targeted therapy that has been shown to weaken the heart in some patients,” he says. “For other women, chest radiation or hormonal therapies to treat breast cancer can affect the heart. But we noticed that across the medical community, there was an inconsistent understanding of the relationship between breast cancer treatment and heart disease.”

Recognizing a major knowledge gap, Dr. Abdel-Qadir and his team scoured through over 20 years of data on Ontario women diagnosed with breast cancer — a resource available through ICES,

a leading not-for-profit research institute — to examine risk factors for heart health issues related to breast cancer treatment, how often heart issues occurred, and whether concern about heart disease should impact breast cancer treatment decisions.

“Our research has found that although heart disease is an important consideration, the long-term risk of breast cancer is greater than the risk of heart disease limiting a woman’s lifespan or quality of life,” he says.

“These findings mean that most women should be encouraged to undergo the best possible treatment their oncologist can recommend, and manage any heart health issues that may arise as a result of the cancer treatment.”

Dr. Abdel-Qadir’s research is already having a direct impact on women and health providers across the medical community.

“There is definitely a growing awareness among both patients and oncologists about the potential impacts of treatment on heart health, and we’re working to continue broadly sharing the findings of our research to help more people make the best decisions for their lives and futures.”

Your generosity makes like-changing research like Dr. Abdel-Qadir’s possible. If you would like to deepen your support, donate online today at www.wchf.ca or call 416-323-6323. Thank you!



A LASTING GIFT: NEW ENDOWED CHAIR IN MEMORY OF MAUREEN GREEN

WCH Association of Volunteers executives Susan Garnet, Lindsay Campbell and Anne McGuire hold a photo of Maureen Green.

The entire Women’s College Hospital community is extending its deepest gratitude to the Association of Volunteers at Women’s College Hospital and the Estate of Maureen Green — a long-time volunteer — for their transformational \$3.8 million gift to establish an innovative new Chair position and invest in new diagnostic imaging equipment for the hospital’s Breast Centre.

A devoted member of the Association of Volunteers for over 17 years, Maureen Green helped to raise thousands of dollars each year in support of programs and initiatives close to her heart. When she passed away in 2020, the executor of Maureen’s estate advised the Association of Volunteers that she had left a transformational legacy gift to the group in memory of her husband, Philip Green.

In 2021, in honour of Maureen’s memory, the Association chose to direct her gift to support two important initiatives: the establishment of an endowed Association of Volunteers–Maureen & Philip Green Chair in Healthcare Equity and Access; and funding to support the acquisition of four new mammogram and four new ultrasound machines for use at the Breast Centre — state-of-the-

art technology that will significantly advance Women’s College Hospital’s role as a leader in breast cancer diagnostics and care.

The new Chair position will be held by a world-class healthcare professional who will work with researchers at Women’s College Research Institute to identify and address gaps in health equity and access that are impacting marginalized and vulnerable populations — including women, older Canadians, and people from racialized communities.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has starkly exposed the inequities in our healthcare system — inequities that are preventing marginalized groups from receiving the care they need and realizing their true potential,” says Lindsay Campbell, President of the Association of Volunteers. “It is an honour to have the opportunity to establish this Chair position in Maureen and Philip’s memory — a role that will ensure the hospital will always have a healthcare leader dedicated to closing gaps in equity and access for people across Canada.”

As an endowed position, the Chair position will be held in perpetuity for as long as Women’s College Hospital and the University of Toronto exist. We look forward to sharing news of the inaugural Chairholder in the months ahead!

YOUR IMPACT DOUBLED!

Donate today to help us acquire leading-edge diagnostic equipment for the Breast Centre! Your gift will be generously matched by FDC Foundation.

Scan this QR code with your phone’s camera app to donate now!

