

## *Each Day, Healthier Together* | 2010 Report to Community

### **Determined staff dive in to help uninsured patient fight cancer**

Helping with harvest last fall, amidst dust and dirt, Todd Wright was sure allergies were to blame for his fatigue and the tightness in his throat that made it difficult for him to swallow his food. His doctor, however, was quick to recognize his symptoms as signs of a more serious problem, a cancer called Type B Non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

For Wright, 56, it was not only bad news, it was also bad timing.

He had worked 25 years as a machinist, but had been laid off two years ago when the economy slowed. He had no medical insurance.

“COBRA temporary insurance hadn’t been an affordable option and I had been on the waiting list for BadgerCare for a year and a half,” Wright says. “I didn’t know what I was going to do to pay for treatment of this cancer.”

He did know, however, that he wanted to fight the cancer with the help of Hudson Hospital & Clinics. “I was born at the old Hudson Hospital and I grew up in Hudson. I feel comfortable here. My primary physician, Kevin Helmen, is here,” he says.

With each passing day, his glands continued to swell, feeling like marbles in his mouth. It was difficult to breathe and sleep well. Dr. Helmen arranged for Wright to meet with an oncologist, Gretchen Ibele. Wright learned that this type of cancer was not curable but was treatable with chemotherapy.

Hudson Hospital & Clinics social worker Erika Schendel remembers getting a call from a staff member in the organization’s Cancer Care clinic, asking for her help trying to find financial resources for Wright.

“It seemed like this person was going to fall through the cracks if someone didn’t work closely with him. And if he didn’t get help, he would probably die,” Schendel says, recalling her thoughts when she received that phone call. “My father-in-law has the same cancer. It’s miserable.”

A determined Schendel, along with Wright’s doctors, nurses, the hospital administration and the patient financial services representatives, all dove in to help get Wright the care he needed.

“Erika was really the star,” says Elizabeth Owen, a registered nurse who works with patients in the infusion therapy department of the hospital, where chemotherapy is administered. “She was the one who put in extra hours and sat on eternal hold with agency after agency, trying to come up with a plan. She’s the bomb.”

Schendel and Wright kept each other on speed dial. She’d tell him who to call and what information to have ready. He’d report back with updates.

Five weeks later, they finally got a break. Turns out that people who are already on the waiting list for BadgerCare, a state health insurance plan, can go to the front of the line if they have a cancer diagnosis and a doctor’s signature.

“Erika got that all figured out. She never gave up,” Wright says.

Schendel says everyone at the hospital rallied behind her to help cover her workload and brainstorm on new avenues to pursue.

Nurse Owen says it was a “happy day,” that first Monday of the New Year, when BadgerCare kicked in and Wright was cleared to start chemotherapy. The medical staff had an infusion therapy room all ready for him. “He was in a good mood, but he is always in a good mood,” Owen recalls of Wright’s first treatment. “It felt like a success even before we started.”

Wright spent six and a half hours receiving chemotherapy that day, with Owen there to monitor him frequently. “He never seemed anxious. He was more eager to get started and always very grateful. The fact that he was just so nice to be around was icing on the cake for all of us,” she says.

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— continued**

Within 24 hours of that first treatment, Wright's glands shrunk and he could breathe easily.

"I went home and basically slept for two days," Wright says. "My body was so worn down and I hadn't slept in so long."

He went back every three weeks, for a total of six treatments.

"I feel like a million bucks," he says. "My last CT scan looked great. My spleen had been enlarged, but now it's back to its normal size. I feel very fortunate, to say the least. Without Hudson Hospital & Clinics and the persistent staff team there, it would have been a whole different story."