



[Clockwise from upper left: Ruth Ewert, Vi Siemens, Maryanne Nikkel and Dorothy Funk]

Mission Moment

It's a family affair for Manitoba sisters

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"I got a pamphlet in the mail that said, 'Every thirty seconds, somewhere in the world, another woman is diagnosed with breast cancer'. I couldn't get that out of my mind."

Those are the words of Dorothy Funk. She and her three sisters, Vi Siemens, Maryanne Nikkel and Ruth Ewert live just west of Winnipeg in the town of Portage la Prairie. Their mother died of breast cancer at the age of 66 back in 1983. Since then, all of the sisters get regular mammograms to test for the disease.

"We've been told the odds were one in four it could happen to one of us, so we're a bit hyper about that," says Dorothy.

The pamphlet that stuck with Dorothy was about a clinical trial being funded by the Canadian Cancer Society. The clinical trial is testing a drug that could help prevent breast cancer.

The Canadian Cancer Society funds clinical trials through the National Cancer Institute of Canada Clinical Trials Group. The group develops, conducts and analyzes national and international trials of cancer therapy, new cancer drugs, cancer prevention and supportive care.

One of those clinical trials, the ExCel Research Study is testing a drug, exemestane (ex-uh-MESS-tane) that limits the production of estrogen. Research has proven that estrogen is a major growth factor in certain types of breast cancer.

Exemestane is already being successfully used to prevent the recurrence of breast cancer in post-menopausal women who have already had the disease. The ExCel study hopes to determine if exemestane can prevent the disease altogether in women who are at high risk. Women from across Canada, the United States and Spain are taking part.

On the ExCel pamphlet, it says “Working together to prevent breast cancer”. That convinced Dorothy to call the Manitoba clinical trial co-coordinator. She was glad Dorothy decided to join the study, but surprised when she was told, “By the way, I’ve got three sisters and I think they’d be great for this study too.”

The four sisters have always been close, with strong ties to one another and their community. Maryanne helps seniors with daily chores like shopping. Vi is a retired nurse who counsels a youth group in her church. Ruth spends three months every year supporting a Christian training centre for international leaders. Dorothy works for a local charity and bakes cookies to energize her town’s junior hockey team.

But the ExCel study is a special commitment they all share, with good reasons.

Vi says, “Sometimes I feel like I’m doing it for my daughter. Both of her grandmothers had breast cancer.”

A cancer survivor at Maryanne’s church heard about the sisters’ participation in the study. She thanked Maryanne and said “Go for it girl!”

Ruth, who meets people from around the world, has a simple, firm perspective. She says, “When you consider it’s a five-year study, it seems like a long time, but it’s important.”

And what about Dorothy, who got the ball rolling? “I’ve been called in to discuss some of my mammogram results. It hits you with you an incredible fear, especially having seen someone die of breast cancer. It never leaves you.”

Dorothy, Ruth, Maryanne and Vi lead active lives, enjoying many sports. They don’t see themselves as an all-star team. But they are, just like the Canadians who join Relay For Life, working together to beat cancer through research.

For Dorothy, every checkup in the ExCel study is a reminder. She says, “It’s a very humbling thing to think I’m going there to help. I’m not a victim. We think of the young women coming up behind us. So, you just look past yourself and say, ‘It will be worth it.’”

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