

## Making it happen: 'One Woman, One Mammogram, One Life'

BY SHARIE DERRICKSON SUN CORRESPONDENT

Myth: A woman who doesn't have a family history of breast cancer is at a lower risk of getting the disease.

Fact: Ninety percent of women diagnosed with breast cancer have no family history at all. One in eight women will be told she has breast cancer.

Myth: Mammograms are expensive and there are few resources to help get one.

Fact: Relatively speaking, mammograms are inexpensive with the test and radiologist reading averaging between \$200 and \$300 dollars.

Fact: Charlotte County has several resources for women to help ensure she gets screened, money or no money, and more resources are becoming available all the time.

And another Fact: Those involved in breast cancer awareness and treatment believe this as Fact — \$200 to \$300 should never be what stands between the life or death of any woman. The fight is on, the troops are rallied with a battle cry of, "One Woman, One Mammogram, One Life." The ever-growing Power of Pink is on the attack.

Most health insurances policies cover screening and diagnostic mammograms, but what about the woman who doesn't have insurance — or a doctor? As a society, there is a dialogue about who gets breast cancer, how it can be detected, and advances in treatment. It is good information, but may be useless to the woman who believes she doesn't have the resources to get the often-life-saving test.

People on the warpath, like Sharon Szepe and her posse of "Passionate Pinks," are just one group dedicated to fulfilling the dream of a mammogram for every woman. Mammograms, along with breast selfexaminations, are the first line of defense against a disease that strikes virtually at random. Szepe and her dedicated crew worked to bring the benefits of the Susan G. Komen for the Cure, Southwest Florida Affiliate, to Charlotte County. And while the Susan G. Komen for the Cure, Southwest Florida Affiliate has some resources, Szepe said outside information on the local programs that help fund mammograms are often hard to track down and the path is difficult to navigate.

Those with good health insurance or Medicaid and Medicare are entitled to women's health screenings and care. It's those who don't have health insurance and who make too much for Medicaid or Medicare, but not enough to spare the couple of hundred dollars for a mammogram — or the cost of a doctor's visit — that often fall through the cracks. But, this doesn't have to happen. There is help in Charlotte County to fulfill the dream of "One Woman, One Mammogram, One Life."

Lori Cohen of the Virginia B. Andes Volunteer Community Clinic (formerly St. Vincent de Paul Community Health) in Port Charlotte explained there are ways to get a mammogram. "We do provide women's health care for those in need," Cohen explained. "The woman makes an appointment with us for a yearly exam. If she needs a mammogram, we have her fill out a form and we send it to Manatee County Public Health."

Manatee County, she said, oversees Project Detect. Florida Breast and Surgical Cancer Early Detection Program also supplies funds to cover the cost of the mammogram and the radiologist's reading. Cohen said that the income guidelines for use of the program are liberal. "A family of four can't make more than \$3,675 a month." The time from application for the voucher, Cohen said, and approval, is usually a matter of a few days to a week. "We are very proactive," she said. Their program provides mammograms for women over 40. If a woman who goes through the Virginia B. Andes Volunteer Community Clinic is found to have breast cancer, the clinic has a cadre of doctors, hospitals, and surgeons who treat for no cost to the patient.

The **Charlotte County Health Department's** system is similar. Beverly Tritchler of the nursing department of the Charlotte County Health Department said their program, that also works on a sliding scale, submits paperwork to the various funding sources, depending on the woman's age and income. A woman age 50 and over will have her request go to Florida Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program, and women between the age of 40 and 50 are referred to Project Detect.

The income guidelines, she said, are also liberal. "A woman can't have health insurance that covers the mammogram and has to meet certain income criteria." "The first time they come to our clinic, they have to schedule a financial screening and the fee is on a sliding scale." For those who don't fit into any of the above programs, Dollars for Mammograms, a Charlotte County grassroots organization, provides a way for women to get mammograms for free by applying directly. The application form is available on its Web site and is available at many Charlotte County doctors' offices.

"They apply to us, and it is for the ones whose insurance won't pay, who are uninsured, or underinsured," Rita Bertler of Dollars for Mammograms said. She said the organization seldom rejects any woman who shows a need. And, if by some chance a woman still can't find the financial resources, many imaging facilities work with patients on a payment plan.

Some facilities, such Peace River Women's Center, discount self-pay mammograms 75 percent and the radiologists that read the images also discount their fees as well to make it affordable, according to Peace River's billing departments.

Kristen Albertson of Advanced Imaging in Port Charlotte said her facility works with the patients at many levels, including referring them to organizations like Project Detect. If those resources are unavailable, Albertson said her facility does all it can. "They bring in a prescription for the mammogram from their doctor. It costs \$200, and that covers the mammogram pad, the computeraided detection, and the reading by the radiologist.

If they have difficulty coming up with the money, we will take payments and work with them so that they can get one. We want to make it possible for every woman to get screened." There are many more out there as warriors raging against the enemy of breast cancer. All have a common message — there is hope — there is a way — and no Ta Ta, despite age, gender (yes, men can get breast cancer, too) or income level, should ever be left behind.