

It's your body - insist on quality health care

By DAWN MARIE BRACELY

3/2/2003

There's little chance Ernestine Lewis will ever walk away from a doctor's office without a clear, concise diagnosis, let alone the proper treatment.

"If I don't understand something a doctor's telling me, I request a diagram. Draw this out. If you've got to use stick people, I don't care," she said.

However, Lewis, who suffers from congestive heart failure, is not your typical patient. She's been aggressive about getting the attention her illness warrants, even from the beginning - in 1997 - when she dialed 911 from her Buffalo home after experiencing breathing problems. Shortly after paramedics arrived she became unconscious, only to awaken in the hospital.

Since then she's been on various medications. At age 56, she's still going strong and is determined to be an active partner in her treatment.

Experts would love to see more patients be aggressive like Lewis about their care, especially given recent studies indicating that women are often not getting adequate treatment, let alone diagnosis, when it comes to heart disease.

"Target the Heart: A Summit on Heart Disease and Stroke in Women," will address these and many other issues on March 13, at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in downtown Buffalo. (Find out more at strokeheart.org, or call 614-1997.)

Once again, we're talking about treatable conditions that aren't being treated as well as they should be.

A recent study in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, showed evidence that many women who suffer heart attacks, which is the No. 1 killer of women, are not

getting adequate treatment. The study found that doctors often fail to prescribe aspirin, beta blockers and cholesterol-lowering drugs that could help them prevent heart attacks.

Of course, there are studies that found both men and women are undertreated for heart disease, but it's been documented that women are treated less aggressively than men.

Dr. JoAnne L. Cobler, of Buffalo Cardiology and Pulmonary Associates in Williamsville, has seen women who complain of the typical symptoms of heart disease, like chest discomfort, but who have had no heart tests done.

About 10 years ago, Cobler saw a woman, although not a patient of hers, who went to an emergency room on a Friday. By the time Cobler saw the woman the following Monday, it appeared she'd had a heart attack.

"They'd sent her home on Valium and it was just because she was going through a divorce and they thought it was anxiety.

"I see this with a lot of women. Trying to get people to pay attention is getting a little bit better, but the (studies) still show women are not treated as aggressively," Cobler said.

She had a female patient with an irregular - or fast - heart rhythm, who also was told the condition was caused by anxiety and the woman was put on Prozac for years.

When she finally saw Cobler, "she said, "Can I come off my Prozac, now?" I said, "Sure," " Cobler recalled. "A lot of times women are told it's anxiety."

In 2003, it's frightening to think that this situation still exists for many women.

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All doctors should take the opportunity to screen patients for conditions that might predispose a woman to heart disease, said Dr. David Kurss, the founder and medical director of the Women's Wellness Center of Western New York in Williamsville.

Additionally, physicians must help patients make more healthful choices, be it diet, exercise, stopping smoking or getting treatment for depression, Kurss said.

And doctors must educate women that they may not experience the classic symptoms of a heart attack, such as the radiating pain that men feel. In fact, many women experience atypical symptoms such as dizziness, nausea and pressure between the shoulder blades.

As Kurss said, women have to be aware so they might seek - and get - proper attention.

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