

Mom's cancer battle a crusade

Hard-to-diagnose disease claimed Apple's Jobs

BY SARAH SACHELI, THE WINDSOR STAR OCTOBER 12, 2011

true



Sara Lee is photographed in front of her LaSalle home on Monday, October 11, 2011. Lee survived a neuro-endocrine tumour, the rare kind of cancer that took the life of Steve Jobs.

Photograph by: Tyler Brownbridge, The Windsor Star

LASALLE, Ont. -- With his death, Steve Jobs has helped accomplish what local mom Sara Lee has tried to do for years — raise awareness about neuroendocrine cancer.

The LaSalle mom was diagnosed with the rare form of cancer more than three years ago while pregnant with her third child. Lee's tumour was in the right ventricle of her heart. Her symptoms disappeared as quickly as they'd come on — a racing heart that would beat 200 times a minute when she was at rest, profuse sweating even in the middle of winter and debilitating headaches that would make her collapse in pain.

Her husband once called an ambulance for her. By the time she got to hospital, her symptoms were gone.

While neuroendocrine cancer is survivable, it is difficult to diagnose. "Doctors are trained to think horses, not zebras," Lee said. "This is a zebra."

According to literature put out by the London Health Sciences Centre, neuroendocrine tumours represent less than one per cent of all cancers. In Canada this translates to an average of two new cases of neuroendocrine cancer for every 100,000 people every year.

Apple co-founder and former CEO Steve Jobs had pancreatic neuroendocrine cancers. Neuroendocrine tumours grow slowly. But because they produce hormones, they can spread.

Jobs was diagnosed in 2003. He had a liver transplant, suggesting the cancer had spread, in 2009.

Lee, now 28, said she was diagnosed when she was 14 weeks pregnant. She considered terminating her pregnancy to undergo treatment. She had two other children to think about. "I thought, 'If this thing is going to kill me, I have to be here for my kids.'"

But with the reassurance and close monitoring of her obstetrician and endocrinologist, she had her baby by C-section at 32 weeks and underwent surgery on her heart to remove the tumour soon thereafter.

A 24-hour urine test while pregnant showed she had neuroendocrine cancer, or more specifically extra adrenal pheochromocytoma. But without further testing, the location of the tumour could not be determined. "The testing would impact the baby, so I didn't do it."

She visits the endocrine clinic in London yearly for a checkup and undergoes the same 24-hour urine test that helped diagnose her once a year.

"The majority of these tumours are found at autopsy," she said, opting for an early detection approach to the disease.

Lee said she has been written about in BMJ (the British medical journal) and through a neuroendocrine cancer support group on Facebook, recently travelled to Illinois to speak at a medical symposium. It was while at the speaking engagement that she learned of Jobs' death.

"My mission has become to spread awareness of this disease."

© Copyright (c) The Windsor Star

Previous

Next



Sara Lee is photographed in front of her LaSalle home on Monday, October 11, 2011. Lee survived a neuro-endocrine tumour, the rare kind of cancer that took the life of Steve Jobs.

Photograph by: Tyler Brownbridge, The Windsor Star
