Endometrial Cancer: My Patient’s Story
By Dr. Ken Ostermann, MD, FACOG

We all have fears, however the words “you have cancer” coming from your personal doctor is likely to be near the top of the list for most of us. Almost 5 years ago these were exactly the words I had to say to my patient, Mary Stewart. A 51 year old energetic and full of life woman, Mary came to see me because of recent changes in her menstrual cycle. Initial discussion with her primary care physician seemed to indicate these changes were the result of being near menopause. For most women of this age everything starts to change and it can be difficult to know what is normal and what needs additional attention. However, Mary’s symptoms persisted and she and her physician decided to investigate further. It was at this point that I was consulted and first met Mary. We discussed her symptoms and decided to obtain an ultrasound and biopsy. The results showed endometrial cancer. For most, being told you have cancer feels like getting punched in the gut – it’s hard to catch your breath, and many are afraid their world is coming to an end. As a physician, I often have to tell people difficult information; however few things are more difficult to tell people than “you have cancer” – yet my feelings are minor compared to the angst Mary and many others like her experience after hearing these words.

Hope after the Diagnosis
One of the best things about being a physician is being able to give people hope. “We know what you have, we know what to do about it and in most circumstances we are good not only treating but often curing your type of cancer,” I assured Mary. Mary’s cancer was not simple to treat; she required a team of physicians and nurses to provide extensive surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. Mary is now 4 and 1/2 years after her diagnosis and treatment. She has no evidence of recurrent disease and is doing extraordinarily well. It has been my privilege to participate in Mary’s care and each time I see her I cannot help but be inspired and admire her spirit and zest for life.

What is Endometrial Cancer?
Mary had a cancer of the female genital tract called endometrial cancer. It is a cancer of the lining of the uterus (or womb). It is the most common type of cancer of the female reproductive organs – more so than cervical or ovarian. It is by far the most common cancer we see in our gynecology office. It usually impacts women after menopause (after cycles have stopped), but also can affect women who are perimenopausal (still cycling but usually ages 40-mid 50s). Very occasionally, it can affect younger women who have gone longer than 6 months without a period.

Symptoms & Risk Factors
For women before menopause, endometrial cancer usually presents with heavier periods, more frequent periods or spotting between periods. Many people, including some physicians, incorrectly attribute these symptoms to being near menopause. In fact, with menopause, the normal progression of cycles is to become further apart and get lighter – not heavier or with extra spotting. Risk factors for endometrial cancer include family history, obesity, and diabetes. However some people, like Mary, have
none of these. If you have any of the above symptoms; heavy bleeding, spotting between periods or if you are after menopause ANY BLEEDING – EVEN A SINGLE LIGHT SPOT, contact your physician for further investigation. This usually requires a biopsy and ultrasound test. Because these symptoms act as a warning signal, we often catch endometrial cancer early and as a result, usually achieve very good outcomes. The most critical part for the patient is to be seen by a gynecologist as soon as the symptoms start -don’t procrastinate. Early diagnosis means cure rates in the 96-98% range. Late diagnosis does not fare as well. If you would like to know more about Mary’s experience and/or endometrial cancer, please visit our website at bdwomenshealth.com or contact us at (920) 885-6090.