Harlan woman found the expert care she needed for rare cancer

Margaret Yost was already familiar with the superb care patients receive at UK HealthCare. Over the course of a few months in 2012, Margaret underwent successful surgery to treat breast cancer at the UK Markey Cancer Center, the only cancer center in Kentucky designated by the National Cancer Institute.

But later that year, Margaret began feeling ill. She lost her appetite and started losing weight at an unhealthy rate. Margaret and her family realized the problem might be serious during a trip to Nashville, Tenn., to see a concert with her niece. “There we were, with all these wonderful restaurants, and I just could not eat,” Margaret said. “Your body talks to you. I had heard people say it, and I found out it’s very true.”

When she returned home to Harlan, Ky., she made repeated trips to the local emergency department, trying to find out what might be wrong. “The pain was in my side, but I really couldn’t pinpoint it,” Margaret said. “I was so tired, and I just couldn’t get anyone to understand I was hurting.”

Returning to UK HealthCare
During a follow-up appointment with her primary care doctor in Harlan, Margaret was told to go
straight to the emergency department at UK HealthCare. And even though it meant having to travel to Lexington, Margaret was relieved her care would again be in the hands of highly trained experts.

Once she arrived at the UK Chandler Emergency Department, a doctor performed a liver scan and found a few spots. Emergency doctors referred Margaret to Edward H. Romond, MD, the medical oncologist she had seen during her breast cancer treatment. Dr. Romond ordered biopsies, nuclear scans, an MRI and other tests.

In collaboration with Lowell B. Anthony, MD, a gastrointestinal and colorectal cancer specialist and chief of medical oncology at Markey, they diagnosed Margaret with a carcinoid tumor.

Carcinoid tumors are rare and grow very slowly, so they often go undetected. The tumors usually begin in the digestive tract, but symptoms are usually vague and doctors often misdiagnose the condition. As a result, most people diagnosed with carcinoid tumors are age 60 and older. Women are diagnosed more commonly than men.

In August of 2013, Ching-Wei D. Tzeng, MD, a surgical oncologist, performed a five-hour surgery to remove Margaret’s gallbladder and part of her liver, small intestine and lymph nodes near her colon. A week later, she was dismissed from the hospital and went shopping with her niece.

“Dr. Tzeng told me I could go if I felt well enough,” Margaret said. “I got a little tired, but it had been so long since I could get out and do anything and enjoy it.”

Margaret said the care she received from Dr. Romond reminds her of a family doctor she knew growing up in Harlan.

“Dr. Romond is one of the most caring people I’ve ever met in my life,” she said. “He is so sincere, so interested in whatever you have to tell him. He was not going to let me go on like this. He was not going to let anything slide. He was going to find out what was going on with me. And he did.”

Margaret said she had been a little worried about her first appointment with Dr. Anthony. She had heard what an accomplished doctor he was and was worried she might be intimidated.

“That was not the case,” she said. “He doesn’t come in and intimidate you with all his knowledge. He communicates with you and laughs with you.”

Looking ahead

Now, two months after her surgery, Margaret said she still gets a little tired, but she paces herself so she can get back to all the things she enjoys. Her favorite activities include playing with her 3-year-old granddaughter, staying active with her church in Harlan and attending UK football games.

Margaret plans to see her doctors at Markey about every six months. She continues to do physical therapy to regain her strength. Her condition isn’t curable, but it is controllable.

“I want to see every season for several more years,” she said. “It’s scary to think you could walk around for years with something you don’t know you have. But now I’m going to do whatever the doctors tell me so I can prolong my life.”

For information on the UK Markey Cancer Center, call 800-333-8874 or visit markey.uky.edu.