

The rigors and rewards of rehab

Flesh-eating bacteria victim gets the help she needs

Rhonda Muhlenbruch of Iowa City spent over 20 years as a nurse, including about 11 years as an emergency room nurse, but never saw anything quite like what she experienced as a patient in early 2009.

Last February, after a simple fall, she developed a condition known as necrotizing fasciitis, which is also commonly known as flesh-eating bacteria. Her treatment and recovery – which included the amputation of her right arm – took her from the edge of death to St. Luke’s Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation.

“I only saw necrotizing fasciitis once,” said Muhlenbruch, 49. “I don’t think it’s all that common, although when you read the literature about it, I guess it’s more common than people realize.”

Muhlenbruch became all-too-familiar with this aggressive illness after Feb. 25, 2009. On that day, she was carrying her grandson while walking to her car at a local store when she tripped and fell.

“I grabbed his head with my left hand and then turned to my right so I wouldn’t land on him and landed on my elbow,” she recalled. “It didn’t hurt the very first day, and then the second day I went to work and it started to swell and hurt a bit, so I went for x-rays and they said it was broken.”

As the pain escalated, Muhlenbruch was admitted to an Iowa City hospital, but her condition continued to worsen. “I got progressively sicker within a 24-hour timeframe, so it happened very quickly,” she explained. “They transferred me to University Hospitals where they performed my amputation.”

Muhlenbruch had developed necrotizing fasciitis and was diagnosed as having toxic shock syndrome. Her organs began to shut down. Two days after her fall, the limb where the infection had started, Muhlenbruch’s dominant, right arm, was removed at the shoulder. Muhlenbruch spent time recovering at University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics before two weeks of intensive rehabilitation work at St. Luke’s Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation.

The road to recovery

Although medically stable, the rehab team at St. Luke’s led by Craig Dove, DO, St. Luke’s Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation medical director had a number of issues to address. Muhlenbruch not only needed attention to heal the wounds from her amputation, but was also dealing with the very real experience of phantom pain in her arm that was no longer there, which required special medication. The feeding and breathing tubes also had paralyzed a vocal cord and she was having difficulty speaking and swallowing.

“Probably the biggest thing was her overall weakness,” explained Dr. Dove. “She had to learn self-care skills, and not only was she weak, she didn’t have an upper extremity anymore, so she had to learn all these new techniques. Basically, we had to get her stronger so she could get up and around and take care of herself.”

“When I got to St. Luke’s, I got there on a Friday, and I thought ‘OK, I’ll have Friday to kind of relax and then the weekend

will be here.’ But they put me to work. They did a fantastic job.”

Despite her two decades of experience in healthcare, Muhlenbruch admits she was amazed at the support and resources available at St. Luke’s Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation. From walking to other simple household tasks, Muhlenbruch was given an in-depth study on how to manage on her own.

“One of my biggest concerns was how am I going to do my hair and put my makeup on,” she recalled. “They taught me how to do that. They were wonderful. There was not a bad egg in the bunch. They taught me mundane things you just wouldn’t think of – like opening jars and taking hot things out of the oven.”

“We have quite a few stairs at our house and we would work on the stairs every day,” Muhlenbruch continued. “They taught me how to use my opposite hand to hold the railing. Carrying groceries. If they wouldn’t have gone over it, I think I would have gotten home and thought ‘OK, now what do I do?’”

Muhlenbruch said she was especially appreciative of the time and attention received from Dr. Dove. “He was there every morning,” she said. “He came in and looked at my wound and answered all my questions. I think that was the big thing – he listened to me.”

Dr. Dove said Muhlenbruch’s attitude played an equally essential role in her recovery. “For any type of successful rehabilitation, one of the big keys is patient motivation,” Dr. Dove said. “We could have rehab teams – the best people in the world – but the patient is the one who has to put the work in. She was very motivated.”

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Craig Dove, DO
St. Luke’s Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation medical director

A hopeful future

She credits her faith and family for her recovery – along with the countless doctors, nurses and specialists who helped her along the way. In time, Muhlenbruch hopes to receive a prosthesis and eventually return to her most recent career as a customer service rep, but for now, she’s thankful for time she can spend with her husband, children and grandchildren.

“I thank God I’m here to see them,” she said. “I have hope for the future. I’m alive. That’s the huge thing.”

■ To watch a video about St. Luke’s Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation log on to stlukescr.org or call 319/369-7331 for more information.

Rhonda Muhlenbruch reviews some of her scrapbook and card making projects. She recently resumed these hobbies.