

Dr. Janet Turner

ProHealth Care

When the patient is ... you.

BY LAUREN SIEBEN | PHOTO COURTESY OF PROHEALTH CARE

When Dr. Janet Turner learned she had breast cancer in July 2017, she was arguably more prepared than the average person. For years, she has worked with cancer patients as a gynecologic oncologist, and for the last decade she has practiced at ProHealth Care in Waukesha.

"I discovered the lump myself, and I knew as soon as I touched it that it was malignant," Turner says. She had a routine mammogram scheduled later that week, so she asked her doctor to change the appointment from a screening to a diagnostic mammogram. Her suspicions were confirmed. But, Turner says, she had braced herself for that outcome.

"I've always found if I'm in a really hard, stressful surgery, I'm able to become extremely focused," Turner says. "I was able to eliminate all the background noise and just knew what I had to do."

So Turner forged ahead. She completed several months of chemotherapy and underwent surgery in January 2018. By February 2018, she was back to seeing patients.

But, Turner says, even a career spent working with cancer patients couldn't quite prepare her for the day-to-day realities of her own cancer diagnosis. "I never really understood completely just how bad some of those general side effects are until I was going through it myself," she says.

Those side effects included nausea, throat pain that made it difficult to eat ("like you were swallowing razor blades constantly"), and reflux so uncomfortable it kept her up at night.

"I knew I wasn't having a heart attack," Turner says. "I was able to rationalize in my mind, 'OK, this is probably reflux.' But it was horrible."

So horrible that Turner decided to say something about it to her oncologist. But, she adds, she is well-aware that few patients can hand-pick a team of providers that they also know as colleagues, and many patients are uncomfortable speaking up about their suffering.

"A lot of times, patients are like 'Well, maybe I'm just imagining this. Maybe this is the way it's supposed to be,'" she says. "A lot of people get the impression that you're supposed to buck up and put on this brave cancer-warrior face, but that's not necessarily the case ... it's really hard."

Turner says her experience also gave her an intimate understanding of how treatment can impact a patient's quality of life. That's changed the way she talks about treatment with her patients now. "I try to be even better at helping patients try to find solutions to all those little problems," she explains. "They're not going to kill you, but they can be horrible to deal with on a daily basis."

Turner also experienced profound fatigue during her treatment. When she returned to work in February 2018, she thought radiation therapy was the final step to her treatment. Instead, she ended up needing two more months of chemotherapy, which extended her treatment timeline into August. Instead of bouncing seamlessly back to her pre-cancer routine, Turner fought through debilitating fatigue while juggling treatment and work.

"It's not any fatigue you've ever felt, unless you've had cancer treatment," Turner says. "It really feels like you've hit this wall and you absolutely know that you cannot go on any further."

When she finally did complete treatment, Turner began to feel like her old self again. Her cancer is now in remission, and by being open about her own cancer experiences, Turner says she's able to connect with her patients on an entirely new level.

"It gives you a lot more credibility as a doctor and an oncologist," she offers. "Patients know that you really know where they're coming from. ... They know you know exactly what they're talking about when they talk about how tired they are, or how scared they are that the tumor might come back."

Turner says her patients have also been a collective source of support through her breast cancer journey. "My patients were just incredible," she says. "I got so many cards and letters and gifts, it was absolutely overwhelming."

In May 2019, Turner served as the ambassador for ProHealth Care's annual Walks for Cancer. The experience was powerful for Turner, who had participated in the walk several times before her cancer diagnosis. But this time — just months after completing treatment — the event was more personal.

"A lot of my patients were there cheering me on, and I was cheering them on," she says. "You just find out there's a lot more support out there than you ever really thought."



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