

Helping Others, Helping Yourself, and Going Fishing!!

Helen M. Sorenson MA RRT FAARC

There is an old Chinese proverb that states “give me a fish and I eat for a day, teach me to fish and I eat for a lifetime”. There are many ways to interpret these words. One possible translation is that it speaks to involvement. While it may be easier to sit back and let others provide for us, it may be better for us to “learn how to fish” and provide a portion of our own sustenance.

Being diagnosed with Emphysema/COPD is frightening. There are many losses you will suffer associated with reduced lung function, frequent infections, the need for supplemental oxygen and an increased workload that accompanies performing routine daily tasks. The easy way may be to allow yourself to sit back and let others “bring the fish to you”. There will be days, perhaps even weeks when there are no other options. What is important to realize however is that, “catching the fish for yourself” may be more satisfying, more beneficial and ultimately will make a difference in how you approach life. Obviously I do not mean that you should actually take up fishing, unless you're so inclined. What is implied is that patients need to become involved in helping themselves.

Emphysema and chronic bronchitis, often referred to as COPD, are lung diseases characterized by airflow obstruction. The damage done may not be reversible but it is manageable. Proper nutrition, exercise, compliance with prescribed medication and staying active are all necessary components of disease management. The need to be involved however does not just stop with managing one's disease.

It has been estimated that there are over 16 million adults in this country with Emphysema/COPD. It is also presumed that an additional 16 million adults likely have chronic lung disease but have not yet been

diagnosed. 32 million people are a force to be reckoned with. Imagine if everyone with lung disease sent just one dollar to an organization that supported research dedicated to a cure, a treatment, a medication or a vaccine that would alleviate the suffering of patients with emphysema or COPD. Realistically though, involvement does not have to mean a donation of money. Joining a support group or becoming an active member of an organization dedicated to the betterment of life for patients and their families is involvement. Writing letters to politicians and encouraging them to support the COPD Caucus or COPD Coalition is involvement. Consider the impact that 32 million letters in support of an initiative dealing with health care for patients with emphysema or COPD would have. There are many positive and creative ways for patients to show their support, and there is strength in numbers.

Patients, you are the front line warriors. You are the ones fighting disease. You understand the real issues related to healthcare access far better than politicians or health care professionals. It may be easy to "let someone feed you". It is much harder to learn how to "cast out your line and feed yourself". Individually, the task may seem daunting but there have been many who forged the path ahead of you. Patients who are and/or have been proactive such as Jo-Von Tucker, John Walsh, Sue Landers, Bill Horgan, Barbara Rogers, John Leaman, just to name a few, have had their own personal struggles and yet persevered. Some are still fighting, others remain in our memories.

I end with another of my favorite quotes from Rabbi Hillel; "If I am not for myself, who will be, if I am only for myself, what am I, and if not now, when?" Helping others and helping yourself is important in the fight against COPD. Do you "want to go fishing"?