



## **Sue Ann Says: A Proactive Approach Can Save Your Life ... And Your Child's**

A staff member here at the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation lost her sister to skin cancer. Mary was a prime melanoma risk: red hair, fair skin, and, growing up on a lake, she had plenty of childhood sunburns. During her second pregnancy, Mary showed her obstetrician the black, growing mole on her back. "Don't worry, honey," the doctor assured her. "Very common to have a mole change during pregnancy."

Had her doctor said, "Very common BUT you need to have it checked by a dermatologist right away," Mary might have lived. An intelligent young woman, Mary was uneasy about the mole. But she trusted her doctor implicitly. She died at age 28, before her daughter was old enough to remember her. That was more than 30 years ago. I like to think such needless deaths don't happen in this day and age. Today's women have better access to health information and are taught to be proactive about their health. But sadly, stories like Mary's are still all too common.

Karen Chelcun Schreiber, a friend of my daughter Tommi, exemplifies how a proactive approach saves lives. Karen's mother died of stomach cancer at age 52. Karen always wondered if the disease might run in the family. Decades later, her brother too was diagnosed with stomach cancer at age 56. Karen talked to her doctor about a possible genetic connection and her own risks. She was told not to worry.

But Karen didn't let her doctor pat her on the shoulder and send her away. She trusted her instincts. Karen kept asking questions, kept digging for information. She learned that a New Zealand researcher had discovered a gene mutation among the Maori people that causes hereditary diffuse gastric cancer.

Karen and her brother thought they'd found the answer. Doctors, however, told them that this hereditary cancer was extremely rare and almost certainly not

connected to the cancer in their family. Ironically, more family members would have to develop the same cancer before the family met the criteria for genetic testing. Karen didn't take no for an answer. "Rare doesn't mean non-existent," she says. She insisted on genetic testing, paying for it out of her own pocket. Karen tested positive. Although she did not yet have stomach cancer, she was at extremely high risk, as were other members of her family. In addition, the gene mutation meant that Karen had a 40 percent chance of developing lobular breast cancer.

Because there is little effective screening for stomach cancer, it is nearly impossible to detect in its early stages. "Wait and see" didn't strike Karen as a good option. She did more research and joined an online support group for people affected by stomach cancer. The more Karen learned, the more she knew what had to be done: have her stomach removed before she developed cancer. Although this decision carried profound lifestyle changes, Karen didn't see it as an option. "It was an opportunity to live," she says.

Karen, her brother and her nephew had their stomachs removed. Because she knew her family history, trusted her instincts and was persistent, Karen may have saved her own life and that of multiple family members.

### **Know your family health history**

Knowing your family history is key. Research your family history and look for patterns. Share this information with your physicians. It is vital in helping your doctor partner with you to make informed decisions about your health.

Karen delved deeper into her family history and created a kind of "family health tree." She even obtained copies of family members' medical records. Karen provides all this information to her doctors. She also makes sure this family health history is passed on to her children, her siblings and their children. Karen understands that being educated and proactive is a life-saving practice. "Ask questions, raise concerns with your doctor, and trust your instincts," Karen advises other women.

Had she lived, Mary would now be the grandmother of four boys and a red haired, fair-skinned, freckled little girl. Mary's daughter Laura is now a nurse. Her family enjoys summer afternoons at the lake house where Mary grew up. Armed with her family history and knowledge about skin cancer prevention, Laura is vigilant about protecting her children from the sun. She also sees the dermatologist twice a year for full-body skin checks and routinely checks her children's skin. Her brother, aunt, uncle and cousins do the same.

Knowledge can mean the difference between life and death. The more we know, the better decisions we can make in partnership with our doctors. Because it all begins with a healthy woman.

Yours in good health,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sue Ann Thompson". The signature is written in a dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Sue Ann Thompson  
Founder & President  
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

*The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts educational forums that focus on prevention, early detection and connecting individuals to resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date educational and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profit. Your donations help WWHF reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about WWHF, visit [wwhf.org](http://wwhf.org) or call 1-800-448-5148.*