

A "Bright Spot" article by Joel Jacobson

Having an ostomy doesn't mean the end of the world

A CALL CAME in last week after an article about Mike Woolridge appeared.

Mike is president of the Halifax chapter of the United Ostomy Association of Canada. Ten years ago, he had bowel surgery that left him with a bag for waste collection attached to an opening in his skin. With his ileostomy, he's getting along just fine, and is as active as he was before surgery.

Last week's caller was seeking advice and support for a 72-year-old man, "a friend who just had an ileostomy. He's unwilling to leave his house, talk to anyone about it, and won't take doctor-prescribed chemotherapy to be sure no cancer is left in his colon area. He says he doesn't want the hassle. I don't know how to get through to him."

The caller asked when the Halifax chapter had its support meetings (the first Sunday of every month at 2:30 p.m. in the reception room at the Bethune building of the Victoria General site of the QEII Health Sciences Centre.)

I just wish this man could have attended the fifth annual meeting of the United Ostomy Association of Canada in Halifax last week at which Mike was extremely busy as chairman.

I wish I could have spoken to the friend before it started, to convince him to attend this conference and meet active ostomates.

So here's an open letter to him, and anyone else with an ostomy who is embarrassed, afraid or unwilling to talk about it.

DEAR SIR:

If you had been at the Westin Nova Scotian, you would have been in the company of 150 men and women, from their mid-30's to their 90's, who have had ostomy surgery. There was no moaning and groaning and woe is me!

These people were so happy to participate and tell their stories to anyone who would listen, that there were few moments of silence.

We, and yes, I have an ileostomy which I absolutely adore, heard doctors talk about colonoscopies, bowels, polyps and tumours, the psychology of coping and getting along with an ostomy, and sexuality after ostomy surgery.

We met manufacturers and distributors of ostomy supplies, saw new items on the market, discussed with others who've had similar surgery the triumphs of living with an ostomy, and even mistakes we've endured.

We laughed, ate danced, had area tours and did all the things we did long before our ostomy

surgeries. The day after the conference, several of our attendees played golf or left for tours of the province. I'm 61, sir, and Sunday morning, after partying Saturday night, I played a game of slopitch softball.

You see, sir, there is life after an ostomy.

One of the Halifax members, in her early 90's, and despite using a walker to get around (not caused by the ostomy) insisted in attending the opening ceremonies and the closing banquet and enjoyed both events.

Having an ostomy, obviously, is not the end of the world. It should not be a time of self-pity. It should be a time to rejoice that we're alive to talk about it because the alternative, succumbing to cancer which we're told will usually occur in someone with colitis or Crohn's disease, is not the best outcome.

There are lots of ostomates who aren't affiliated with a support group. National president Lorne Aronson of Toronto (ileostomate) says there are only 4,000 members of the UOAC. More than 40,000 people have either a colostomy, ileostomy or urostomy.

The 36,000 unaffiliated are missing out on the advice, comfort and camaraderie offered by those who want to help others.

You, sir, are one of those 36,000 today. Hopefully your friend will show this column to you, show you there is life after ostomy and there are people willing to talk to you and help you remove doubts about your surgery.

Some members of the Halifax chapter have had ostomies for up to 30 years. Betty Yetman was national president. Ruth Kenney is an ostomy nurse who has first-hand experience. Burleigh (sp??) Wile is a former chapter president and visits new ostomates. Ed Tummers served in active duty with the Canadian navy after his surgery.

Come see us Sept. 8, sir. I want to meet you, and show you how you, too, can be productive and happy.

Yours truly,

A fellow ostomate.