

# Cancer survivor changing medical opinion

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In 1996, when two-time cancer patient Susan Wener spoke at a hospital conference about how visualization can improve quality of life, a doctor interjected that she was “full of s---.”

“How dare you tell someone filled with tumours to imagine themselves cancer-free. You are being irrational and unethical. What you are actually doing is creating false hope,” he charged.

Attitudes to alternative or complementary medicine had apparently changed little in the profession four years later, when her husband, Jonathan Wener, became president of the Jewish General Hospital (JGH).

An oncologist remarked that he hoped Wener would not be bringing the “witchcraft” his wife practised into the hospital.

In the intervening years, a significant shift appears to have taken place judging by the numerous endorsements Susan Wener has received for her new memoir, *Resilience: A Story of Courage and Triumph in the Face of Recurrent Cancer*.

JGH gynecological oncologist Dr. Walter

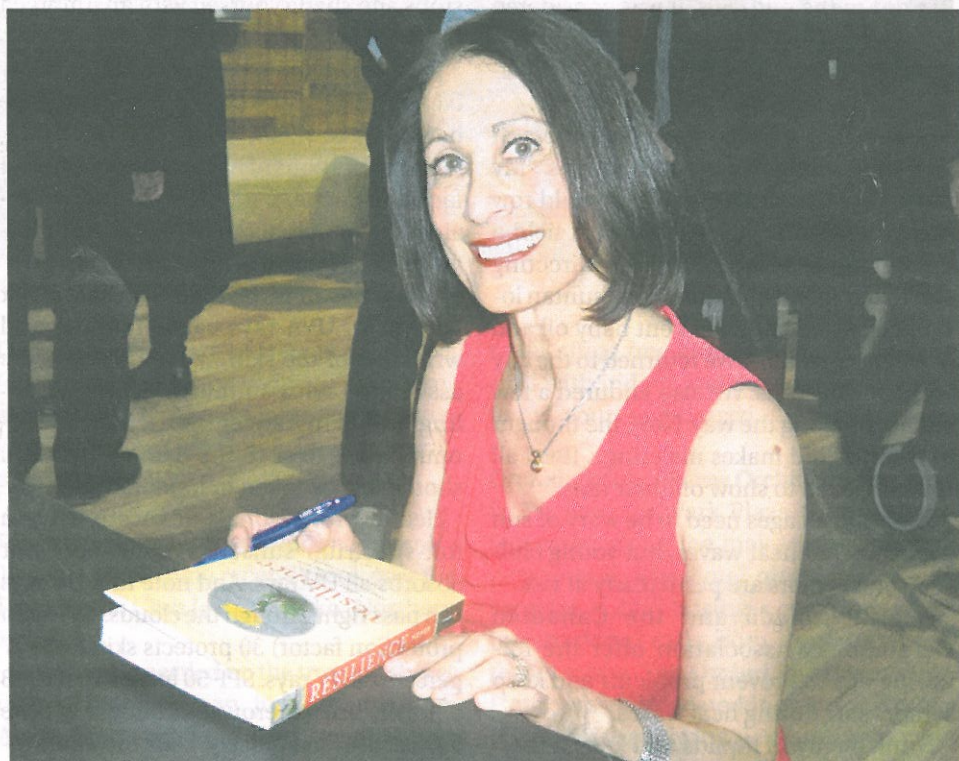
Gotlieb spoke at the book's launch, and a raft of doctors were among the 500 guests. The book contains praise from several doctors, including McGill University medical dean Dr. David Eidelman.

Wener is, to say the least, resilient. She was diagnosed with colon cancer in 1989 at age 36. Five years later, one of her lungs was removed when the disease was found again. She was given a 25 per cent chance of living five years.

She has endured more suffering than anyone should experience. Her health problems started when she was in her 30s, and her surgeries included a spinal fusion and a hysterectomy. There were other health scares throughout the prime of her life.

For many years, Wener was subject to increasingly frequent bowel obstructions, a complication of the colon cancer, which became so acute she feared leaving home. Finally, doctors at the Mayo Clinic discovered what was wrong, and since surgery four years ago, Wener has made a full recovery.

At 61, she describes herself as “thriving” and looks it. She is radiant and serene. It's an age she never believed she would reach. After her first cancer bout, Wener prayed simply to see her three daughters



Susan Wener signs a copy of her new book *Resilience: A Story of Courage and Triumph in the Face of Recurrent Cancer*. JANICE ARNOLD PHOTO

– the eldest then 14 – graduate from high school. Wener today is the ecstatic grandmother of seven.

*Resilience* is frank and intimate, but upbeat in its message. Wener describes honestly her innermost emotions and the strain her illness put on the family.

But she credits cancer for “transforming” her from a sweet, needy young woman into a strong individual. She was a wife at 20 and a mother soon after, and the disease set her on the path of personal and professional growth.

In her search to find a balance between body, mind and spirit, she became a natural health consultant, and she now helps people “navigate that mysterious world of alternative medicine.” She urges cancer patients to not reject, but also not to rely solely on, doctors and western medicine.

Patients should take “personal responsibility” and thoroughly investigate the options, she says.

Faith may also be important. Other than observing the Jewish holidays, Wener was not brought up with religion, but God became her “constant companion” after cancer, and she encourages adherence to a belief system if it gives comfort.

She believes alternative medicine can be a complement to conventional treatment and wishes the medical profession would be more open-minded. The myriad of choices may or may not affect physical improvement. The point is that they can help patients cope, she says. According to Wener, there is nothing wrong with instilling hope. Wishful thinking is OK.

Certainly, Wener has been there, done that. After the lung cancer, she refused

chemotherapy, which had made her extremely sick after her first cancer. Her research told her it offered no guarantee of non-recurrence.

“I had decided to go rogue,” she writes, “and from the moment I made my decision, I never looked back. I was not afraid. If I was going to die, I was going to die my way. I was quite peaceful.”

She tried just about everything out there – much of it without the knowledge of anyone.

From innocuous methods such as creative visualization and veganism, Wener explored the off-beat and even risky: from drinking her own urine to Hawaiian healers to injecting herself daily with something called 714x, a mixture of camphor, nitrogen and sea salts.

She acknowledges making mistakes and says the lesson is to do your homework and not be rash. But, she was also astonished by what she did gain in going off the beaten path – some of it scientifically measurable.

Above all, Wener's message is that whatever is handed to us, life must continue to be lived to the fullest possible – right to the end. As she says, “pain is inevitable, but misery is optional.”

She has, incidentally, been able to practise her “witchcraft” at the JGH. Gotlieb invited her to sit on the gynecological oncology tumour board some years ago.

A portion of the proceeds from *Resilience* will be donated to research, in particular the Whole Person Care Program at McGill University and REOP, the Rehabilitation, Exercise, Oncology Program, at the JGH Hope and Cope Wellness Centre. ■



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