

Dragon boaters inspire courage

By ALEX FRAZER-HARRISON

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Not long ago, few women had a bright outlook on the future if they were diagnosed with breast cancer.

Today, an ever-growing group of Canadian women is showing that it's still possible to reach for goals and to set positive challenges in the face of a potentially deadly disease.

Abreast in a Boat is the name of a program started at the University of British Columbia several years ago.

An exercise physiologist, Dr. Don McKenzie, had long heard warnings from other doctors that women who have had breast cancer surgery should refrain from strenuous upper body exercise.

The fear was they'd develop lymphedema, a swelling of the arm and chest caused due to the removal of lymph nodes as part of the breast cancer procedure.

But McKenzie had the reverse view — that in fact strenuous exercise of the upper body might actually help in the recovery. So with the aid of 25 cancer patients, he formed an all-female dragon boat team.

"Dr. McKenzie felt (the lymphedema warning) might be a fallacy — he wanted women with breast cancer to get back into more active lives," explained Judy Huber, a member of the UBC team who underwent a bilateral mastectomy when an early stage of cancer was detected a year or so ago.

"Dragon boating was chosen because it involves strenuous upper-body movement — it uses all the muscle groups," Huber added.

The first team had a respectable showing at the World Championship Dragon Boat Festival in 1996. Since then, the idea has spread around Canada and internationally.

Calgary's dragon boat team, *Sistership*, won its class

last year.

"I was diagnosed with breast cancer a year and a half ago, and I heard about the dragon boat in Vancouver; I contacted the Canadian Cancer Society and they were enthusiastic about the idea," said Suzi Morgan, co-manager of *Sistership*.

She said the impact of training and practising for last summer's local race held great importance for the 25-member Calgary team.

"A lot of us had problems looking towards the future," Morgan said.

"But it really gave us as individuals a lot of energy and renewed vision. In the middle of a hard life (with cancer) we have something that is exciting and challenging."

The challenge paid off — *Sistership* won its class at last year's Dragon Boat races, and the team is gearing up to repeat that this year.

Members of the Abreast in a Boat program are touring Canada this week to promote breast cancer awareness, Huber said. The message team members are sharing is there is life after breast cancer.

Some 19,000 people will be diagnosed with the disease in Canada this year, but with new treatments, including bilateral mastec-

tomies for those who are at high risk due to family history of cancer, it is no longer the guaranteed death sentence it once was.

For more information on Abreast in a Boat, call 1-604-734-3663.