

Hospital blues

I experienced an overwhelming sense of helplessness in the face of such debilitating pain. I asked every two minutes, "Now? Now can you give her something?"

BY KELLY MASEK

It all seemed to come at once: my partner's hysterectomy, a close friend's breast cancer, a sudden awareness of vulnerability and mortality. We were in a state of shock for several days after my lover and I learned that she had uterine tumors. Our circumstance was made more difficult because we had recently moved, leaving behind our friends, a personal physician and the familiarity of an old home.

Health

The day we called to tell two of our dearest friends of our situation we learned that one of them had been diagnosed with breast cancer.

Any one of these conditions would be demanding in its own right, but taken in a dose of three it was like missing a whole flight of steps in the dark. We were stunned. We lived very quietly for the next several days, afraid to make any sudden moves, loud noises, or draw any more of life's attention our way. My partner began her education in hysterectomy by gathering books from the library, and talking to friends, physicians and any woman who would discuss her own experience with hysterectomy. She received the thoughtful edition *Coping with a Hysterectomy: Your Own Choice, Your Own Solution*, by Susanne Morgan, Ph.D. (New American Library, 1985). Women speak about their personal experiences in this book, and

Morgan offers valuable alternative as well as traditional information.

During this information-gathering stage my partner focused on choosing whether to have surgery or not. I focused on what would happen to us if she chose the surgery. Surgery meant hospitals, and I hated hospitals with their peculiar odor and secretiveness — the curtained beds and mysterious proceedings. I also was afraid of possible hospital attitudes and rules that might separate us during this critical time. When my partner did choose to have surgery we made a special appointment with our physician to talk about the hospital, the surgery and us. We had many questions, and we decided to come out to our physician. The result was gratifying. Not only were my fears about the hospital somewhat allayed, but our physician informed us that she considered our relationship in spousal terms. She said she would do everything within her power to support and validate our partnership. This ensured that I could be with my partner at all times in the hospital, that I would have a voice and an identity, that we would have a little more power. Another action we could have taken, and one I recommend, would be to have a power of attorney document drawn up.

A power of attorney is a legal document that states clearly the responsibilities of each partner to the other under a given set of circumstances. For example, the document can be limited to health care, detailing the responsibilities of one partner if the other is medically incapacitated and allowing one to make decisions for a partner who is unable to do so. A power of attorney



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is not an expensive or time-consuming document to create, and it can be specific or broad in scope. Its presence makes a strong statement to those who will provide care for you or your partner that you consider yourselves to be in a legitimate partnership that must be reckoned with during medical treatment.

I don't think there is any way to prepare for a hospital stay. A hospital is unlike any other place in the world. I viewed my role there as that of primary caretaker. I was there to comfort and reassure, ask questions, make requests or demands, and bring edible food. As a caretaker I logged many hours waiting — waiting for surgery to finish, waiting for nurses to administer pain relief to my hurting partner, waiting for healing, waiting for the other shoe to fall.

In truth, until you walk out those hospital doors with your partner at your side in a wheelchair (per hospital policy), you do not believe you will ever make it out. You believe you have entered the "Hospital Twilight Zone." You believe your partner when she tells you that a hospital is no place to heal and that she is afraid she will not heal.

I worked hard to believe in healing in that

place — I had to believe as I watched my partner succumb to some unknown secondary infection and be reconnected to the hated IV for antibiotic administration. This was our blackest hour, second only to the time immediately post-surgery when I saw my partner existing in a realm of pain that frightened and sickened me.

I experienced an overwhelming sense of helplessness in the face of such debilitating pain. The fifteen-minute wait required to establish vital signs prior to administration of pain medication was eternal and hellish. "Now? Now can you give her something?" I asked every two minutes. On that first long day I was dependent on the caring and steadfastness of two close friends and my partner's mother. Together we made it through some shaky hours.

On the fifth day, the day of the Unknown Infection, I reached my limit. I could not stand seeing nurses poking and prodding, practicing their routine work on my lover — who also had reached her limit. I fled the room only to come face to face with a friend who happened to stop on her way through town to see how we were doing: the universe provides. I had a good long cry and our friend gave us her presence like a bouquet of courage.

Courage is high on my list of what is needed in a hospital. You need courage and you need fans and supporters. It helps to decorate the hospital room with familiar things from home. Don't stop asking questions until the day you walk out the door. Key questions are, "Why are you doing this?" and "Is there an alternative?" — especially if the current procedure is causing more than the usual amount of pain or discomfort to your partner. Be forewarned of the ups and downs of healing: There will be reminders, perhaps weeks or months later, when unexpected pain or bleeding sends you and your partner hurtling back to that vulnerable time, that time of uncertainty. Fears will rise to the surface and demand attention. Be especially good to yourselves in these times because you are fragile, but getting stronger.

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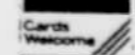
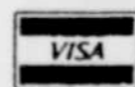
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