

Cancer Coup

Two Canadian Clubs Fuel Research Breakthrough

by Anne Ford

In 2009, Sherwin and Andrea Mah of Vancouver, Canada, had four friends and family members die of cancer. Then things got worse.

"In November, my wife decided to get a mammogram," says Sherwin, a member of the Vancouver Chinatown Lions. "They found two lumps. In short order, they were diagnosed as cancerous." Andrea underwent a double mastectomy and four rounds of chemotherapy. And then, somehow, things got worse again.

Doctors recently discovered a tumor on Andrea's kidney. Though her prognosis is good, "it's always shocking to hear the word 'cancer,' and now we're hearing it a second time," Sherwin says.

The experience has left the Mahs with a heightened appreciation for the cancer-fighting efforts of Lions. For the past decade the Vancouver Chinatown Lions have been raising significant funds for cancer research. "We always knew it [supporting cancer research] was important," says Sherwin. "But when it hits you personally, you have a greater appreciation."

That's something fellow club member Paul Wong knows all about. Several years ago, Wong lost his father and two sisters to the disease. "Before they passed away, I made a commitment to them that I would do something to eradicate cancer," he says. That's why, in 2001, he began rallying his club to the cause. And that's how the Vancouver Chinatown Lions and the Vancouver Arbutus Lions, in partnership with Lions Clubs International Foundation, have come to raise half a million dollars and counting for cancer research.

It all began with an invitation. About 10 years ago, Wong—a businessman who turned his father's one-man hand laundry into one of the largest laundry services in Canada—was asked to attend a BC Cancer Foundation presentation, where he found himself promising that his Lions club would raise \$100,000 for the foundation within the next decade. "I didn't even tell my club about

this," he impishly says. "I just made the commitment." He thought to himself, "If I do not raise the money over 10 years, I will pay the balance myself."

The BC Cancer Foundation is the fundraising arm of the BC Cancer Agency, which provides care to cancer patients in the province of British Columbia and the Yukon Territory. In the last few years, the agency has made several exciting strides in cancer research. These include the discovery of the gene that causes a type of ovarian cancer called granulose cell tumor, as well as the discovery that a mutation on a particular gene prevents it from stopping the growth of tumors in two types of ovarian cancer.

At the time, of course, Wong didn't know those discoveries would take place. He just knew it was time to put money where his mouth was. So he proposed to his club that they organize an annual dinner to award a Medal of Merit to a local community leader, with tickets to be sold to community members. "It was an instant success," he says. At ticket prices of \$1,500 per table, the proceeds swiftly added up. In just three years, they had raised almost \$375,000—more than three times the amount Wong had promised. With the aid of the Vancouver Arbutus Lions (who co-host the Medal of Merit dinners) and three matching grants from LCIF, that figure has reached \$520,000.

So how exactly have those funds benefited the fight against cancer? Dr. Marco Marra, director of the BC Cancer Agency's Genome Sciences Centre, explains: "We work on DNA, trying to find mutations that are associated with cancer. You can think of mutations as spelling mistakes in the genetic code. We know these mutations will tell us something about the how the cancer came to be in the patient, and they are also likely to reveal important targets for therapy. The thing that has allowed us to be able to look for the mutations is a technology called next-generation sequencing."