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Why Jill and Charlie Doiron Donate to Help Fund Clinical Trials

An Edmonton chemist and her husband's \$300,000 donation will fund much needed clinical trials

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By Jacqueline Louie



Photo by Darryl Propp

Jill and Charlie Doiron have hope for a better, healthier future for breast cancer patients today and in the future.

That's why they've recently made a major donation to help fund clinical trials at the Cross Cancer Institute in Edmonton. They want others facing a cancer diagnosis to receive the benefits that Jill did from the facility's world class specialists, facilities and clinical trials.

The Doirons feel it's important to give back to the institution where Jill benefited from top doctors doing leading-edge research into better treatments for breast cancer.

In 2001, Jill, then 44, was diagnosed with stage 3C breast cancer and needed surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. Statistically, her chances of surviving five years using conventional treatment were not much better than 50:50. These numbers concerned Jill and Charlie, who both have science backgrounds. Her medical team helped them focus on what they could do to improve the odds, so that Jill would be around see her three young children grow up.

"They told me you never know which side of the statistics you'll be on, so don't give up," says Jill, who jumped at the opportunity her care team offered her, to participate in a worldwide clinical trial studying three different chemotherapy combinations. Each of the three options was at least as good as the best treatment option available at the time – and all had the possibility of being better than the conventional treatment. "One of the drugs being evaluated in the trial is now the current best treatment for the type of cancer Jill had," Charlie says.

For Jill, participating in the clinical trial through the Cross Cancer Institute was an easy decision: it meant the possibility of a better treatment, longer-term followup and the fact that her participation would help advance scientific knowledge and understanding of new treatments. "It had the potential to improve the odds of survival over the standard treatment," recalls Jill.

Her journey back to health was not without a few bumps in the road, with local cancer recurrences near the surgical site in 2006 and again in 2011. Each time, she chose to participate in another clinical trial.

The Doirons, who live in Sherwood Park, firmly believe that access to these clinical trials and the excellent care Jill received from the Cross Cancer Institute are factors contributing to why she is alive and thriving today. "I'm doing great. We take one day at a time and you develop an attitude of gratitude – because we really are grateful for the care I received," Jill says.

For his part, Charlie believes that if Jill had not participated in the clinical trials at the Cross Cancer Institute, she might not be here today. They are especially thankful to Dr. Anil Joy, and research nurses Diane Bodnar and Shelley Sass, "for their amazing advocacy, care and support."

The Doirons feel it's important to give back to the institution where Jill benefited from top doctors doing leading-edge research into better treatments for breast cancer. To this end, they've made a multi-year commitment of \$300,000, through the Alberta Cancer Foundation, directed to the Cross Cancer Institute to fund breast cancer clinical trials.

"You've got a talent pool of medical staff at the Cross Cancer Institute who work very hard," says Charlie. "There are a lot of good things being done there using conventional sources of health care funding, which covers current standard treatments. Private donations help the Institute to go beyond the basics to explore the newest treatments and participate in world-wide clinical trials."

They could have chosen to leave a legacy donation, but instead opted to make their donation now, so they can see the benefits of their commitment. "When you donate while you're still alive, you get a chance to see your dollars at work," Jill notes.

“Some of it is paying back in gratitude for the benefits we’ve received from the Cross Cancer Institute – but it’s also a commitment to further the understanding of breast cancer and its treatment. It’s an investment in our future – and in our children’s collective futures – perhaps a future without breast cancer.”

The Doirons’ generous donation will help make a difference in many lives. “It’s a phenomenal and very welcome donation that will enable us to take the ideas of cancer researchers in Edmonton and bring them to patients for testing,” says Dr. John Mackey, director of the Cross Cancer Institute’s clinical trial unit. “We know that patients who go on clinical trials have better outcomes, so I have no doubt these dollars are going to save lives. Clinical trials are incredibly important, because they bring tomorrow’s cancer treatments to patients today.”

Each year, clinical trials at the Cross Cancer Institute allow more than 600 people to undergo new treatments that could become state-of-the-art in a few years time. Clinical trials also allow the Cross Cancer Institute to access drugs that have not yet been approved for use in Canada, “even though we know they are working well,” Mackey says. “The clinical trials at the Cross Cancer Institute are really the heart and soul of the institute – because clinical trials are the tool we use to improve our treatments.”

Clinical trials are both complex and expensive, Mackey says, noting that the Cross Cancer Institute’s clinical trial program is the most active program of its kind in Canada: more patients per capita participate in clinical trials in Edmonton than in any other jurisdiction in the country.

The Alberta Cancer Foundation and the money its donors provide go to support the Cross Cancer Institute’s clinical trial program, which helps patients with many different types of cancer. On top of this funding, the Cross Cancer Institute’s clinical trial unit leverages its core funding from the Alberta Cancer Foundation, at a rate of about six to one, with additional dollars from companies and cancer researchers from around the world.