

# Blood Friends for Life

A public health story from...

Camden County Health Department

Fiftyish Lucy McArthur\* had been unusually tired for weeks, so she decided to visit her old friend at the Camden County Health Department. The breast cancer survivor of three years prayed her disease had not returned.

“Lucy didn’t have the energy to do her normal routine,” says Bee Dampier, the department’s RN in charge of communicable disease. “A usual day for her is to get up at dawn with her husband, cut a load of wood, unload it, clean house, look after her aging mother...and on it goes. I told her she needed to see her doctor.”

The doctor didn’t find anything wrong, but as a precaution wrote orders for the health department to perform two different blood tests on Lucy. The first, a complete metabolic panel (CMP), gauges a person’s blood sugar, kidney and liver function; and, the second, a complete blood count (CBC), measures a person’s red and white blood count. Besides Lucy, more than a thousand Camden County residents get these two blood tests annually—along with cholesterol and thyroid tests—at tremendously reduced rates through the health department.

“Normal costs of blood tests can be expensive,” says Bryant Burton, administrator of the Camden County Health Department. For instance, a person can pay up to \$60 or \$70 for a test in a medical facility or lab, as compared to \$8 at the health department. But many physicians ask the health department to perform the tests to save their patients money.

They know that many of Camden County’s 39,000 residents would be unable to afford the tests otherwise, and would do without. We’re a rural county in south-central Missouri; twenty-two percent of our residents have no health care, which is much higher than the state’s 12 percent uninsured rate. Many citizens have benefited because of the compassion and generosity of the medical community.”

In Lucy’s case, “all of her blood counts came back at the ‘critical value level,’” says nurse-friend Dampier. “That meant her physician had to be called right away. It was early morning, around 6 o’clock, so I called the hospital and had him paged, but he didn’t have access to Lucy’s home phone number, so he asked me to call and tell her to go to the emergency room immediately.”

As it turns out, Lucy’s diagnosis was acute lymphocytic leukemia, a fast-growing cancer of the white blood cells. Her hope of survival now rests on a bone marrow transplant from her younger sister, also a breast cancer survivor, which she awaits in a St. Louis hospital.

“If Lucy had waited longer before coming to see us at the health department, her chances of survival would have been much less,” says nurse-friend Dampier. “I’m leaving for St. Louis today to visit her. I might find a book to take her, a funny one to make her laugh.”

\* (The case described is real, but the name has been changed).

*“Lucy didn’t have the energy to do her normal routine...”*

