Finding his voice after losing larynx to cancer

Over the telephone, Walter Trudeau sounds like a man with a zest for living.

“I feel really good. Life is good,” says the 80-year-old Kelowna resident.

Most of us wouldn’t expect a person in Walter’s position to have such an upbeat manner, but he is amazing in many ways.

First, he is speaking over the telephone and his words sound clear and strong. Yet, he is not conversing in the way most of us do. Walter has no larynx (vocal box.) He had a laryngectomy almost three years ago due to esophageal cancer that spread to his larynx. Today he speaks with the help of an indwelling voice prosthesis.

A laryngectomy is the removal of the larynx and separation of the airway from the mouth, nose and esophagus. The laryngectomee breathes through an opening in the neck called a stoma.

With the help of Kelowna speech language pathologist (SLP) Saskia Makela, Walter found the right prosthesis for him and learned how to speak again.

Saskia is one of only two B.C. SLPs outside Victoria and the Lower Mainland currently trained to work with this population of patients. She says she loves the work.

“It keeps me on my toes for assessing the situation and finding a particular answer for each challenge that arises.”

Walter and his wife Jenine are grateful for Saskia and her dedication to making sure her patients are able to communicate successfully.

“She is up to date with the latest information technology,” explains Walter. “We’ve tried several different methods and came up with a really good one for me.”

Support group
He also attends the support group Saskia oversees, called the Laryngectomee Connection. Patients from as far away as Merritt, Falkland, Keremeos, Kelowna, and Penticton meet every two months for education and similar experience discussions.

Saskia welcomes any laryngectomee (also medically identified as a neck breather) to this group.
“We have had guest speakers such as an accountant to talk about the disability tax available and a paramedic who discussed how to ensure emergency responders know of their condition because they won’t be able to get an airway the usual way,” says Saskia.

Walter is one of about 25 laryngectomy patients within Interior Health. His wife recalls the day he was fitted with his prosthesis that allowed him to speak again.

“When he came home, he said hello to our little grandchildren and they were so excited. They ran about the house saying ‘grandpa can talk, grandpa can talk’.”

Learning as a family
Jenine, a retired nurse, says that from the start they shared what they learned from Saskia with their family, including the young ones. By showing them the stoma, his tube feeding and voice training, everyone just views it as a normal part of Walter’s life.

It’s not easy for anyone to be left without a voice box, but the right approach is everything, says Jenine.

“With Walter’s attitude, we decided it’s how we accept it. We are going to do as much as we can while we can and enjoy many more years together.”

And living as a laryngectomee is just a small part of Walter’s life.

“I go golfing. We snowshoe at Big White. We travel a bit. We live a pretty active life,” he says.

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Photo Caption:
Speech Language Pathologist Saskia Makela works with Kelowna resident Walter Trudeau to make sure he has the best prosthesis for his communication needs. Walter had his larynx surgically removed in July 2013 after cancer.