

chicagotribune.com

A brave soul steps forward to help those with ailing lungs

By William Hageman
Tribune reporter

April 27, 2008

Grace Anne Dorney Koppel hadn't planned on becoming an advocate for patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Dorney Koppel, a Maryland attorney and the wife of newsman Ted Koppel, was diagnosed with COPD, a group of diseases that cause progressive lung damage, in 2001. She began working with the National Institutes of Health on the issue and eventually was asked to be a spokeswoman.

"I said, 'Don't you have any famous people who have this disease?' And they said, 'We have none who will admit it,' " she said. "So I decided to step forward and take the slings and arrows because I was a smoker [the main contributing factor] and really make it my life's work to learn as much as I can about COPD and to bring some kind of message of hope."

Her latest project is to help promote the Illinois state COPD action plan, put together by the Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago and scheduled to launch Thursday. The program aims to foster better prevention, treatment and management, public awareness and data collection, among other things. The goal is to reduce COPD-related mortality and improve patients' quality of life.

There are an estimated 24 million COPD sufferers in the U.S., and half of them are not diagnosed. Too, conditions such as air pollution and workplace contaminants can worsen the situation.

"It is a disease that's underdiagnosed, undertreated and spreading like wildfire," Dorney Koppel said by phone from Maryland. "We die at the rate of 1 every 3 minutes, 130,000 a year. And nobody even knows our disease. I mean, we are not some obscure genetic malformation where there may be only 10,000 people who have the disease. We're 24 million and counting."

Although there is no cure, the good news is that COPD patients can improve their lives significantly through medication, exercise, pulmonary rehabilitation and improved diet.

"That's one of key messages for Illinois' state plan: It is a disease that can be treated. You don't have to be nihilistic about COPD. With treatment, people will improve."

Illinois is only the third state to come up with a COPD strategy (Colorado and Arizona are the others). It's an issue everyone will have to face sooner or later.

"A plan is needed because by 2020 it's going to be the third leading cause of death in the United States and the world. We're standing at the edge of a precipice. As we're living longer, more and more people are going to develop this disease."

For more information on Illinois' COPD action plan, go to www.lungchicago.org/site/epage/23867_487.htm. And to learn about COPD, its symptoms and treatment, go to learnaboutcopd.org.

Copyright © 2008, Chicago Tribune