



Breast cancer survivor Susan McPeak-Sirois and her husband Charles Sirois (not pictured) have donated \$2.5 million to help fund a group that will promote clinical cancer trials. Dr. André Robidoux, right, will head the group's scientific committee. JOHN MAHONEY/MONTREAL GAZETTE

Cancer researchers find strength in numbers

Group will promote clinical trials and fund women's participation

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When Susan McPeak-Sirois was diagnosed with breast cancer 15 years ago, her chances of survival were estimated at less than 40 per cent.

McPeak-Sirois and her husband Charles Sirois are donating \$2.5 million of their own money and have pledged to raise another \$10 million to fund a group uniting Quebec's four major breast cancer research centres to promote experimental clinical trials in the province and also fund the participation of women living in the regions.

"Many close friends of mine and many acquaintances died of breast cancer," McPeak-Sirois said. "One

very close friend died three weeks ago. She was only 42. I get shivers thinking about it."

Over the years McPeak-Sirois has accompanied so many women through breast cancer treatments, "that this has become my second residence," she says walking along the third floor clinic at Hôtel-Dieu Hospital on St. Urbain St.

She had her first chemotherapy session here, frightened and sick and "nobody spoke to me," she recalled, as staff was too stunned by the day's news: it happened to be Tuesday, September 11, 2001; terrorist hijacked airplanes slammed into the World Trade Centre, killing thousands.

That day marked the beginning of McPeak-Sirois's advocacy for breast cancer.

"Because you really need some TLC when you are going through this," she said. However, if it wasn't for an experimental clinical study trial she was asked to enrol in 14 years ago, McPeak-Sirois believes she wouldn't be here today. And she's hoping to give women living in remote areas, far from university research centres, the same opportunity she had by bringing research trials to their bedside.

"It's not going to happen today but soon," she promised.

The idea for the privately funded McPeak-Sirois Group was actually hatched six years ago when McPeak-Sirois says she realized that personal advocacy wasn't enough in the fight against breast cancer.

She began canvassing the big players in cancer research, starting with her own physician, oncology surgeon André Robidoux at the Centre Hospitalier Université Montréal, and then got commitment from medical teams at other

major research centres: the Jewish General Hospital, the McGill University Health Centre, and CHU de Québec - Université Laval.

But she faced setbacks because of changes in hospital politics and health administrators - two hospital centres replaced their directors over financial scandals, Arthur Porter at the MUHC and Christian Paire at the CHUM - and so she had to go back and knock on the same doors again.

The Group was officially incorporated in April as a non-profit organization and its six directors include its two co-founders, McPeak-Sirois and her husband Charles Sirois, plus oncologist Gerald Batist, director of the Segal Cancer Centre, Jewish General Hospital, Gertrude Bourdon, president and CEO CHU de Québec - Université Laval, Ann Lynch, associate director clinical operations MUHC and Vincent Poitout, director of research at the CHUM.

The CHUM's André Robidoux will be heading the Group's scientific committee, whose eight members, including some of Quebec's top researchers, will be responsible for generating and managing clinical trials.

"It's well known that patients in clinical research trials do better than those who aren't," Robidoux said, especially for rare cancers and conditions.

But researchers battle for the same funding dollars. Quebec has a better chance of research protocols by leveraging their resources together, he added, to improve the quality of care "and the visibility of our investigators."

"It's all for one and one for all," Robidoux said with a chuckle, like the motto associated with the novel, *The Three Musketeers*, however this will be four hospital centres combining their patients who may be eligible for experimental research.

"It could be targeted therapy based on molecular profiles of a tumours or a protocol involving hormonal therapy," he said.

However, it's important to note that many with breast cancers detected early can - and are - best treated with standard therapy, Robidoux noted. It's the advanced, rare or complex cases that would benefit from experimental trials.

"For example, we want to do an observational study of breast cancer in pregnancy," he added. "We've each (researcher) had a little bit of experience with that but there aren't many cases - young women, pregnant, with breast cancer - and the question is, is the evolution of the cancer different because of the pregnancy? There are 6,000 women (annually) with cancer in Quebec. Those are the kinds of studies that we can do far more easily together."

The scientific committee has already met twice and the reaction around the table, Robidoux said, was one of giddy excitement "like children." The Group is expected to announce its research protocols in the spring.

McPeak-Sirois said her husband also contributed his extensive business knowledge to "this startup," and she does not want to be known as "the wife of" someone who provided philanthropic financing.

"Above all my husband is a caregiver," she said. "He has been by my side from the beginning and we're doing this together as a couple."

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