

NEWS ARTICLE from [The Statesman Journal](#), Salem, Oregon, 8-1-03, By SUSAN TOM

``Lyme disease tough to diagnose

When Kara Chytka found out that she had Lyme disease, she cried tears of joy.

For months, the mother of three thought that she had Lou Gehrig's disease [ALS -- amyotrophic lateral sclerosis], a progressive neuromuscular disease with no cure. Doctors gave her between 18 months and five years to live.

Lyme disease was a reprieve from the death sentence.

With treatment and luck, the 25-year-old Aumsville resident could recover some of her physical abilities. Her speech is slurred and she still needs help with personal care, but she now can use a walker.

Although there are more than 16,000 cases of Lyme disease in the United States each year, health experts say it often gets misdiagnosed in areas where it is not [thought to be] prevalent, including Oregon.

Chytka's story is an example of how people can help themselves by taking an active role in their own health rather than accepting a doctor's opinion without question.

"I didn't believe it," she said of the Lou Gehrig's disease diagnosis. "I read the symptoms, and I had so many other things besides them."

Chytka began researching the symptoms on her own out of desperation and defiance, looking up diseases and doctors on the Internet. One response eventually led her to a San Francisco specialist, and in March he diagnosed her with Lyme disease.

Now, Chytka and her husband, Chris, are urging people to learn as much as possible about their illnesses and seek a second and even third opinion.

"She's very stubborn, and if it were not for that, and not believing the doctor's diagnosis, she'd be sitting around waiting to die," Chris Chytka said. "This is proof that doctors don't always know what they're doing." ...

Many doctors don't consider Lyme disease when making a diagnosis because there are [supposedly] so few cases in Oregon, said Dr. Rafael Stricker, a San Francisco hematologist who has treated about a dozen Lyme-disease patients from Oregon, including Chytka.

The symptoms, which include joint pain, flulike fevers, fatigue and paralysis of the facial muscles, are shared by other diseases such as multiple sclerosis and Lou Gehrig's disease, also known as ALS, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. Most people don't remember being bitten by a tick and don't get the rash associated with Lyme disease.

"What's even worse is doctors saying nothing is wrong and it's all in your head," Stricker said ...

For Chytka, about five months passed between the ALS and Lyme-disease diagnoses.

When she was diagnosed in October with ALS, she was shocked. The thought of leaving three children, now ages 6, 4, and 2, without a mom was agonizing.

"I was not going to let (the disease) tell me how I had to live," Chytka said as she mopped tears from her eyes.

That was when she began searching for answers herself.

Dr. Elizabeth Blount, Chytka's family doctor in Silverton, said she is treating Chytka for Lyme disease despite the conflicting diagnoses. Oregon Health & Science University, where Blount sent Chytka last year, said it was ALS. Stricker, the San Francisco specialist, diagnosed it as Lyme disease, but a second opinion from a Salem specialist said it was not.

"I'm not sure what to believe," Blount said. "There's an outside chance she could have both."

Although both diseases have similar symptoms, Lyme disease often causes arthritis and inflammation, and ALS isn't associated with pain, Blount said. She also supported Chytka's desire to try the antibiotic because the family wanted hope.

"When you have a hopeless disease with no treatment, people will try anything," Blount said.

But Stricker, the San Francisco doctor, said that Chytka has the neurologic form of Lyme disease, which is severe and does not respond to antibiotics like the other types. It is hard to know how much of her abilities she will recover, but Stricker said he has been impressed with her recovery and response to the antibiotics. He will have a better idea within a year.

"It also depends how long the disease goes without being treated," Stricker said.

After a week on the new IV medication, Chytka is making visible improvements, said JoElla Coleman, Chytka's caregiver and cousin by marriage.

"She's getting stronger," Coleman said.

At her worst, Chytka's hips, knees and joints hurt and she had some swelling. Her toes sometimes were numb and she was losing her grip strength and use of her hands. Her reactions slowed, her speech slurred and she was falling a lot. She had to concentrate hard to get the messages to her brain to move her body.

Now, since the new drug therapy, Chytka can take a few steps with the help of a walker ..."

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