

Commentary... Cancer and me

By Jim Williams
Guest Columnist

The words “you have cancer” are life-altering.

If you’re me, you’ve heard it three times. Once would have been enough.

I am currently recovering from radiation and chemotherapy for a stage two anal cancer, which I was diagnosed with in September of this year.

But before I get too far along here, let me give you a brief history of my previous adventures in cancer.

In March of 1998, my then-wife and I, and our baby daughter moved to Sisters from the Portland area. In August of that same year I was diagnosed with early stage colorectal cancer.

I was 41 years old. You’re not supposed to get cancer at 41, I was told. Not only did I have cancer, I had two tumors, one in my rectum, and one in my large colon. Both were early stage as it turned out, and after surgery, eight days in the hospital, and a course of radiation and chemo, I was deemed, cured. Woohoo, yay me!

I tolerated the treatments pretty well, and at my age didn’t worry too much about a recurrence. The doctors got it all, and the follow-up treatments took care of any sinister cancer cells that still may have been lurking.

Even though I tolerated treatment well, it wasn’t like I didn’t have side effects to deal with. Although I didn’t lose any hair I did deal with the usual nausea, and was very fatigued for months afterward. But, all in all, I moved on with my life, didn’t have much in the way of lifestyle changes, and basically tried not to worry about it.

The worst thing you can do is live in fear that it may come back. Now, based on staging, sometimes there is higher risk of recurrence with later stage cancers than the one I had, but I also had the medical professionals telling me that if I made it two years, that I was probably free and clear.

Two years later I had no recurrence, and my check-ups were extended to every couple of years from the every six months that I had previously been doing. Life was good.

In 2004, I had a career change and was in a training program with Deschutes County, to become a building inspector. My stomach had been bothering me a bit, was gassy, and having bouts of diarrhea, but I didn’t think too much of it. Then one evening I had this little jabbing pain in my stomach which I thought was just going to be another diarrhea episode. Well it was, except I filled the toilet bowl with

blood. I had hemorrhaged, and needless to say was scared that something was terribly wrong. I tried to somehow rationalize that it was something I ate and that it would pass. Still, I called my now ex-wife and told her what happened. She ended up taking me to St. Charles, in Bend. We went directly to emergency where they asked what the emergency was. I told them I was hemorrhaging from my butt. Funny, but when I told them that, I was immediately whisked away and taken in the back to see an emergency room doctor.

I was questioned about my health history, they ran a few tests, and I was kept overnight for observation. Things calmed down and I had no further episodes. I met with a doctor the next morning and had a colonoscopy scheduled for that day. The gastroenterologist was fairly certain it wasn’t a tumor, as tumors don’t usually behave that way. Whew! sigh of relief I thought. Well, sure enough I had the colonoscopy, and sure enough, I had cancer again. This time I was 46 years old.

This of course puzzled my crack cancer-care team of five years ago. One doctor

though — in the understatement of the decade — declared, “Your colon is not your friend.”

“Well no ...” I thought, so now what, genius? Well, after some more tests, it was determined that my particular form of colon cancer was genetic. In fact it wiped out my aunts and uncles from my dad’s side of the family, and was now taking aim at me. Luckily, it was determined that this was another early stage tumor, located once again in my large colon. The answer this time though was to take my large colon completely out.

As it was explained at the time, “we can take the tumor out, but we’ll see you again in five years, the only way to keep this from coming back, is to take out your colon.”

It meant that they would take out my large colon, and reconnect me with my small intestine, to my rectum, problem solved...

Well, not exactly.

Getting a cancer diagnosis once is hard. A second

time even more so. With a third diagnosis, I had to wonder if this was the charm, that maybe this would be “it.” Every indication now that I’m done with treatment is that I’ll be fine, but that hasn’t been determined for sure just yet. A stage-two diagnosis also comes with a higher chance of recurrence. So while I try not to worry about that, it does weigh on me. I’m not the young man I once was. I’m 59 now. I wonder how much time I have, anyway?

Until this diagnosis, these are things I didn’t think about much. Now, I feel old. I wonder, if I survive this, what other cancer waits for me in the future? It sucks to know how you’re probably going to die. Not a burden I would wish on anyone.

So, 12 years later, here I am again. This time I’m in Oregon City, happily remarried, dealing with cancer once again, and longing to be back “home,” in Sisters. More on all of that in our next installment.



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