

Commentary...

# Cancer and Me: Third time's the charm

By Jim Williams  
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It started with a feeling of general malaise, or a feeling of lacking motivation.

After not seeing a doctor for a number of years, I finally, with the not-so-gentle persuasion of my wife, Katie, made an appointment to see a doctor.

After some blood work, a general exam, and interview, I was diagnosed with prostatitis, and low T. The doctor wrote a scrip for an antibiotic, and gave me a hormone shot with the idea that I would go on hormone replacement later.

A couple of weeks later, I was not responding to the antibiotics, and had noticed some blood in my stool, which can be a side-effect of taking a broad-spectrum antibiotic. At my next appointment I told the doctor this, so he decided to do a rectal exam.

As soon as the exam started, I knew something was wrong. It hurt, really bad. I've had enough of these damn things to last me a lifetime so I knew something was up. I asked if the prostate felt normal, he said he couldn't feel it as there was a mass in the way. He tried to explain it away as a possible this, or a possible that. I asked him how big it felt. When he said "golf ball," I bowed my head and my heart sank to the floor.

Having been to this rodeo twice before, I knew this wasn't good.

A call was made to a gastroenterologist and an appointment was scheduled for the next day. As I drove back to work, all I could think of was "not again!" I

was in a state of disbelief; I couldn't believe this was happening to me. My previous tumors had been dime- and quarter-sized, and were very early stage. This one being the diameter of a golf ball, changed the game this time.

The appointment with the gastroenterologist and a follow-up biopsy several days later confirmed the worst: I had stage-two anal cancer.

The tragedy in this, of which there are many, is that this cancer is totally unrelated to my previous cancers. I couldn't comprehend this at first. If it's not related, why the hell am I getting it again, and why am I getting it again in my lower GI? Fate I guess, had decided to deal me another crap hand, and told me to "deal with it."

Many consultations, scans, exams, and blood draws later, it was determined that this stage-two cancer was curable; not my words, but the doctors. I found this quite encouraging of course. I delved into the Internet world of information to find that stage-two anal cancers leave their victims with only a 65-75 percent chance of being around five years later. I continued to research the treatment I was going to get and found it to be the gold standard, with a high rate of success. Five-and-a-half weeks of radiation and two weeks of chemotherapy were all that was needed to eradicate this enemy growing inside me. Terrific. I was given the talk about side-effects and other horrible things I could expect during and after treatment. Having had this

treatment before, I wasn't too concerned. Big mistake.

Meanwhile, Katie picked up the ball and totally ran with it. She drove me to my appointments, and took over all of the household duties I could no longer do as treatment progressed. She was my advocate when I was on so many pain medications that I wasn't sure what day it was. I can't imagine the toll all of this has taken on her. She has had to work full-time, take care of me, the house, the animals, everything, while I went through treatment and recovery.

Treatment this time around was unlike the one previously. I mean it started out the same, but about four weeks into it, I could tell this was different. The side-effects became far more severe. My lower pelvic area was basically cooked. Everything in that area no longer felt or worked the same. The pain became excruciating. Fatigue started to set in, a fatigue I've never experienced. I could no longer sleep through the night, though. I was getting up every 45 minutes for several weeks. The basic job of personal hygiene became a huge ordeal. Going to bed at night was oddly the worst. I was almost too tired to get out of my chair just so I could take out my contacts, brush my teeth, and go to the bathroom before crawling into bed.

I'm now six weeks out from treatment. The doctors are happy with my progress, I am not. I am still tired, I still have to go to the bathroom far too often. I am slowly weaning myself off of opioids, which were great for pain relief, but are not

so good when you no longer need them. They are very addicting and I now feel like a junkie trying to get off the stuff.

So here I find myself, with an excellent short-term prognosis, and an uncertain long-term future. It makes you look at things differently. You wonder how many Christmases you have left. Will I have enough time to do the things I've always wanted to do? Hell, will I even make it to retirement? When you're 40, the end is far enough out there, you don't think about these

things. When your mortality is staring you square in the face you find yourself thinking about death far more often than is probably healthy.

I want to be healthy, I want to put this behind me, I want to live like I did before, with the knowledge that I've had cancer, but I don't let it rule the way I live. I don't know that I'll ever feel that way again. This hangs over me like a dark cloud that just never goes away.

What I wouldn't give to be me again.

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