

"I was radioactive"

I was "contaminated" with high levels of radiation. But I wasn't the victim of a freak nuclear accident; I was undergoing a medical treatment for cancer
By Linda George



The author can now hug her husband, Dan, and her young children, Andrew and Cara, without fear of endangering their health

A big fluorescent "R" marked the door to my hospital room, warning staff members and other patients to beware. And no one—not even my doctor—was allowed to come near me for days. That's because I had just finished drinking a dose of radioactive iodine—and any person who came within six feet of me would become exposed to the radiation.

The "atomic cocktail" I'd consumed was actually a medical treatment for thyroid cancer. Although it may sound like something out of a science-fiction movie, doctors have used radioactive iodine for forty years to treat some types of thyroid problems. In fact, First Lady Barbara Bush was successfully treated with it earlier this year after she was diagnosed as having a thyroid disorder called Graves' disease (a form of hyperthyroidism), which occurs when the thyroid produces an excess of hormones. For reasons not yet understood, a person's antibodies attack the thyroid gland and make it overactive.

The disorder, which is much more common in women than in men, is characterized by such symptoms as weight loss, eye

problems, such as double vision, rapid heart rate, anxiety and nervousness.

My own thyroid problem was much different, however. It began in November 1985, when I went to my family doctor, Melvyn Tiger, complaining of pressure in my right ear and occasional dizziness. I thought it was probably an earache, which I was prone to, and expected Dr. Tiger simply to prescribe an antibiotic and send me home. Instead, he began examining my neck. Finally, he told me that there were two suspicious nodules on my thyroid. "They're the size of large marbles," he said. Then he suggested I call his friend, Dr. Robert Somers, a surgeon.

I was terrified. I knew my condition was serious because Dr. Tiger had seemed so concerned. But I'm only thirty-one years old! I thought. If anything happened to me, who would raise my four-year-old son, Andrew, and my one-year-old daughter, Cara? Who would be a loving wife to my husband, Dan?

By the time I got home I was so upset I was hyperventilating. I rushed to the phone to call Dan at work, *(continued)*

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but my fingers were shaking so much I could hardly dial the number.

Dan tried to calm me. "We'll do whatever we have to, Linda," he said soothingly, but I knew he was upset.

Dr. Somers told me that I would need to have a biopsy to diagnose my condition, and he scheduled the procedure for November 25. A couple of days later, Dan and I met with him to get the results.

"Linda, I'm afraid you have cancer," the doctor said.

Dan turned white, and later he told me he thought he was going to pass out. Cancer had been my worst fear, too, but surprisingly, once I heard the diagnosis I was no longer afraid. I just wanted to get as much information about the disease as I could in order to begin fighting it immediately.

What I learned was that thyroid cancer is more than twice as common in women—who will have an estimated 8,000 cases this year—as in men; doctors think it may have something to do with the hormones women's bodies produce, but they don't know for certain. Although this cancer can strike at any age, if it's discovered soon enough, the cure rate is high.

Dr. Somers explained that I would have to undergo a CAT scan of the neck and upper chest to determine how extensive my thyroid cancer was. The test was done on November 29, and the news was encouraging.

The doctor said that he thought my chances for survival would be very good if I had a thyroidectomy—surgical removal of the thyroid gland. Then, each day for the rest of my life I would have to take a pill to replace the hormones that my thyroid had once produced—thyroxine and triiodothyronine, which control the body's metabolic rate and body heat.

The surgery took place on December 9, and I remained in the hospital for one week, recovering. Shortly thereafter, I met with Dr. Bernard Shapiro, chairman of the nuclear medicine department at Albert Einstein Medical Center, in Philadelphia, who would oversee my follow-up treatment.

"It's hard for surgeons to remove every little piece of the thyroid," Dr. Shapiro explained. "Radioactive therapy is a proven postsurgical method for zapping out any residual thyroid tissue."

He told me that I would be given iodine-131 in the form of a "cocktail," which would make my body radioactive for three to four weeks. I would have to stay in an isolated, radiation-proof room in the hospital for three to seven days in order not to expose any-

one else. (Barbara Bush did not have to be isolated like this after her treatment because she took a much smaller dose than I did.) As far as medical experts knew, Dr. Shapiro added, the procedure posed no increased risk of cancer for the patient.

Although this sounded frightening, I knew I didn't have much choice. So on January 10, I checked back into Einstein. But nothing could have prepared me for what I found when I opened the door to my specially prepared hospital room. Every square inch of the floor was covered by large sheets of paper taped together. Plastic covered the doorknobs, the shower faucets, the bed and the toilet seat. There were two large bins in the corner of the room where I was to put my leftover food, plastic eating utensils and dirty linens. Because any person coming within six feet of me could be in danger, all food and laundry deliveries would be placed on a chair near the door.

"I've seen some patients take a look at this room and run like a bat out of hell," Dr. Shapiro told me.

A short time later, four medical residents wheeled the radioactive cocktail into my room. The liquid—one third of an ounce—was held in a thick lead container that must have weighed about thirty pounds. The physicians watched as I gingerly sipped the metallic-tasting stuff through a straw. As soon as I finished, they left the room—rather quickly.

Except for the nurses' aide who placed my dinner on the chair near the door, I didn't see another human being until the next day. Although the doctors had told me I was allowed to have guests as long as they stayed at least six feet away, I didn't want to take a chance with the health of my family and friends. That night, I talked to Dan and the kids on the phone and told them how much I missed them.

I began to feel like a leper. The hospital staff couldn't even come into my room to change the bed. Dr. Tiger called me from a phone in the hall outside my room. My only visitor was Dr. Shapiro, who came in briefly each day to determine my radioactivity count. Standing as far away as possible, he would scan me with a Geiger counter that had a three-foot-long arm. My neck was so radioactive that the meter ticked furiously every time it came near that part of my body.

I tried to sleep, but it was hard to get comfortable in the plastic-covered bed that crunched every time I moved. Late that night I finally drifted off to the droning of the television.

I woke Saturday morning feeling extremely nauseated. There was a burning sensation (continued on page 31)

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inside my neck, and my glands were swollen the way they were when I'd had mumps as a child. The doctors assured me, though, that one dose of radioactive iodine had no side effects. "It's probably just a cold," they said. I tried to believe them.

They also told me that in order for my count to become low enough for me to go home, the iodine would have to pass through my body. In hopes of speeding up this process, I drank gallons of liquids. Although Dr. Shapiro told me this wouldn't help, I was determined to try anything.

By Monday morning I was desperate to return home. I missed my family terribly. The smell of all my leftover food, which had remained in the trash bin for several days until it was no longer radioactive, permeated the room. But worst of all, when I tried to flip on the TV I discovered it was broken. I was inconsolable. The television had become my constant companion in that lonely room.

I started to wonder if my radioactivity had caused the set to malfunction. After all, the controls were right next to me on the bed. And if the radioactive iodine could cause the TV to break down, what could it do to me? I called Dr. Shapiro in a panic. He told me that the situation was just a coincidence.

His next words cheered me. "I'll be in to see you shortly," he promised. "If the radioactivity count looks better, you'll be out of here soon."

When he came in later that morning and scanned me with the Geiger counter, he was amazed at the drastically reduced count. "You'll be able to go home today!" he exclaimed.

I was thrilled. But before I could set foot out of the room, all of my belongings had to pass inspection, too. It was wonderful to see Dan and the kids again, but even at home I had to follow strict precautionary measures. I was told to maintain a three-foot distance from everyone between the ages of eighteen and forty-five—because they were in their reproductive years—and I was forbidden to touch my children for one week, since the radiation could harm their developing organs. (The First Lady also confronted a few restrictions after drinking radioactive iodine—she was not allowed to hug her grandchildren or hold the new White House puppies for about seventy-two hours.)

Since Cara was obviously too young to understand what was happening, I sent her to my mother's house for the week so she wouldn't feel rejected. I explained the situation to Andrew,

and he took it very well—except for the time he fell and wanted me to kiss his "boo-boo." I felt totally helpless when I couldn't. Each night, Dan slept on the living-room couch. Visits from friends and relatives were restricted, and because my best friend was pregnant, I didn't dare see her for a month.

Finally, the week was up and I was able to hug my family again and resume all my normal activities. After being cooped up for what seemed like forever, it was a real treat to run errands without worrying about endangering anyone.

Six months later, I went back to Dr. Shapiro for a checkup. He prescribed a body scan—X-rays of my entire body—and a thyroid uptake exam, to make sure that all the thyroid tissue and cancer cells had been destroyed during treatment. Because my daily thyroid pill contained synthetic hormones that could influence the outcome of these tests, I would have to stop taking it for one month to allow my body to detox. And without these hormones, the doctor told me, I was likely to feel more tired than usual.

The first two weeks without the medication were manageable. But toward the end of the month I could barely stay awake. Taking a shower and getting dressed were even more than I could handle. I couldn't think straight, and my speech became a slow, boring monotone. My body no longer had the energy to ward off chills, and I shivered constantly. I gained ten pounds, although I hardly ate. By the end of the month, I was sleeping sixteen to twenty hours a day.

After four weeks, I was pronounced completely detoxed from the thyroid hormones. I was then given a radioactive pill that would act as a tracer during the impending exams. Two days later—once the pill had had enough time to take effect—I was finally ready to be tested.

Waiting for the results that same day was agonizing. I knew that if Dr. Shapiro detected any cancer cells, I'd have to go through the radioactive-iodine treatment all over again. I tried to think positively.

When Dr. Shapiro walked into the waiting room, he was smiling. "I'll see you again in five years!" he told me. (The five-year mark is a milestone in terms of recovery for many types of cancer; however, I would continue to see Dr. Somers for regular checkups—every three months for the first year—to make sure that the cancer had not recurred.)

Today, even though my experience was a bizarre one, I can't help feeling lucky. Thanks to my radioactive cocktail, I am a cancer survivor. ■

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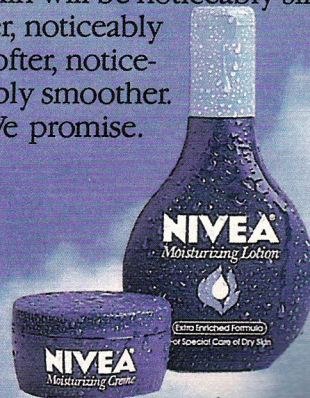
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