

Coping with Cancer

By Jack Cox

Jack Nicklaus, the Golfing legend once remarked *"Crises are part of life. Everybody has to face them, and it doesn't make any difference what the crisis is."* All of us live our lives and, too often, the greatest crisis we face could be being late for a movie or forgetting to pick up the laundry. However, eventually all of us will face major challenges, crises, or fears that will shake our very being.

One of our greatest crisis or fears is being diagnosed with cancer. As one expert noted *"It is normal to have a degree of fear of diseases and, but everyone dreads getting any form of cancer."* In fact, the fear of getting cancer is called *Carcinophobia* referring to the irrational and extreme fear of getting cancer. That fear can become a reality when you are diagnosed with Cancer

I have seen some of my family members and close friends lives taken by cancer. My sister Lotte lost her life to Ovarian cancer at the age of just 52. My son John was diagnosed with Stage 4 Hodgkin's Lymphoma and was cured after a horrific battle. The battle with cancer can continue throughout ones live as well. For me all of that was tragic but those were sicknesses for others but not me. I have felt great and never really had a serious illness in my life. That all changed suddenly on June 15, 2021, with a phone call from my doctor.

I just had a complete battery of tests done by my new doctor with the Mark Twain Hospital of Dignity Health in Copperopolis. It was about noon time on a bright warm day. I picked up the phone to hear the concerned voice of my doctor Jack Coombs reporting my test findings. He said he was pleased with all of my reports except for one. My Prostate-Specific Antigen (PSA) test discovered my PSA score was 64 when it should be in the low single digits. I frankly knew nothing about PSA tests. I learned that the PSA is a protein produced by normal, as well as malignant, cells of the prostate gland. The PSA test measures the level of PSA in a man's blood. I learned the blood level of PSA is often elevated in men with prostate cancer. I had discovered my previous doctor, who just retired, didn't do PSA tests and relied solely on digital exams. That was a big mistake!

Dr. Coombs told me with numbers that high there is a likely chance that I might have prostate cancer. That was shocker. My life flashed in front of mine. Was I looking at my life ending soon? My first concern was for my wife of 54 years. Marianne is the most important person in my life. Then there are my children and the rest of my family. I still have more to do it his life. I thought "Was this it?"

Approaching the Reality, You Have Cancer

I asked myself *"Just how do I approach all of this."* The first step was to find out if I actually had the disease and that required tests. With the help of my daughter Katie, I was fortunate to be accepted as a patient of the University of California San Diego Medical Center's Department of Urology. Within 10 days of my PSA results I drove to San Diego and met with Dr. Kareem Kader, the department chair and an expert on Prostate Cancer.

Two weeks later a biopsy was performed with 12 samples taken with four being determined to be cancerous. Yes, I had cancer. I learned that my cancer was aggressive, and had a Gleason Score of 8 out of 10. I needed to move quickly.

So, my question now was how do I cope with this big change in my life? I had so many different emotions. I first took steps to educate myself about prostate cancer and what were the alternatives to dealing with the malignancy growing in my body. *Medical News Today* advises *"Receiving a diagnosis of cancer can come as a shock to anyone, but one important way of coping with it is to be well informed. Cancer is often surrounded by an aura of myth, and much of what people think they know can often just be hearsay."*

The Mayo Clinic suggests “ *Maintain honest, two-way communication with your loved ones, doctors and others after your cancer diagnosis. You may feel particularly isolated if people try to protect you from bad news or if you try to put up a strong front. If you and others express emotions honestly, you can all gain strength from each other.*”

The approach I took was to recognize that I have this disease and that I need a constructive course of treatment to confront it. I sought to identify the best plan. The options were primarily removal of the prostate organ by surgery, or radiation therapy or chemical oncology to kill the cancer. I talked with Dr. Kader at UCSD, and he advised against surgery for reasons I will deal with later. He said I do not need to now pursue Chemotherapy. He planned to refer me to the Radiology Department at UCSD for radiation treatment through the use of photon or gamma rays. I discovered that there were side affects associated with this treatment including exposure of unnecessary radiation to adjacent organs, sickness, and slight burning of the skin. I wanted to learn more about this and other options before I contacted the UCSD radiology department.

I quickly learned that my most important advocate is me! My advice is learn everything you can about the disease and the variety of treatments to deal with it. Thomas Jefferson once stated, “*Knowledge is power!*” In this case gaining knowledge is vital. The Internet and Google were an important research tool. I also shared my news with friends and colleagues. The Mayo Clinic and other health care providers urge cancer victims to be open about their diagnosis and share it with others. I learned that you will never know when some friend may give you advice that will save your life. I learned soon how true this advice would be.

One of the options that people suggested to me was surgery. As mentioned previously, the surgical option was removed quickly because of my age, and its limited potential long-term benefit for me. I also learned that there is also a risk that cancer can be spread to other tissues organs or tissues through surgery. Again, through friends I found several cases where that is precisely what happened.

Radiological Treatment of Cancer

I determined my best option was radiological treatment. I was aware of this treatment option since my son John had undergone radiation treatment at Stanford University for his Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. I was ready to undertake that option, but I learned of other treatment options through friends. I discovered through this process how important It is to educate yourself about the disease, treatment options, and communicating with others.

I learned about traditional radiological treatment through photon or gamma radiation but learned there is another newer option of called Proton Therapy. I learned about his from my friend Russ Thomas who has been diagnosed with prostate cancer. As I noted earlier, friends can really be helpful.

Just what was this technology I had never heard of before. I discovered from research that Proton technology was developed by United States Department of Defense for the Manhattan Project in the 1940. Even earlier research began in 1931 at University of California by Dr. Ernest Lawrence. Part of his team was J. Robert Oppenheimer who had directed famous Los Alamos Laboratory developing the nuclear bomb. Effectively this new cancer killing technology was a derived from the United States Department of Defense and was a “spin off” of military or space projects.

Nearly 45 years later in 1990, the first medical application of the therapy was undertaken by Loma Linda University. They were the first to learn how proton technology could be focused as a narrow “pencil beam” to kill cancer cells. This technology permitted the protons to be concentrated only on the diagnosed organ or tissue sparing nearby organs or tissues from unnecessary and potentially harmful radiation.

Medical research is validating the effectiveness of Proton Therapy and the use of effectively “nuclear age” medicine. Well known Scientist John Cameron observed decades ago the value of this technology “*Most medical physicists work in the physics of radiation oncology making sure that the desired dose is given to the cancer and the dose to normal tissues are minimized.*”

I discovered it is vitally important to ask questions and determine your final plan. Clearly Proton Treatment was the direction I wanted to undertake. I learned that there are only 27 Proton Centers in the nation, however they use different technologies therefore all treatments are not the same. For example, while Loma Linda's Proton Center began in 1990 and are excellent, the centers operated by the Mayo Clinic in Phoenix and Rochester are only five years old and equipped with latest Hitachi Proton Therapy technology.

Making the Big Decision: Moving to Arizona Becoming a Mayo Clinic Patient

Since the Mayo Clinic was significantly newer than the two others in California, I contacted them. I had no idea if they would accept me but what I discovered surprised me. The Mayo Clinic has been rated as the number one hospital in America for the last decade. There is a certain mystique attached to it and many people believe it takes wealth and contacts to become a patient. I found these perceptions were totally wrong. I made a cold call to the Mayo Clinic on August 2 and found them to be very helpful and welcoming. I was registered the same day I called them.



A zoom meeting was quickly arranged for me with Dr. Stephen Schild, a radiology oncologist the same week. Amazingly, one week later I was in Arizona for a series of pretreatment tests and preparation for treatment. I found the Clinic to be amazingly well organized and comprehensive in their approach. Prior to leaving for the Mayo Clinic, I was thoroughly briefed on pretreatment preparations including tests and the implanting of markers to guide the Proton Beams to kill the cancer. They informed me that following the preparation, I would be administered a dose of Lupron which reduces by testosterone. Testosterone actually grows cancer cells.

Two weeks after my preparation visit to the Mayo Clinic, my wife and I moved to Arizona for the 6-week period of 28 Proton treatment. This was extremely fast. I found that at Mayo I was being cared for by an entire team of doctors, nurses, technicians, nutritionists and more from multiple disciplines. I found the people at Mayo to be extremely friendly and absolutely professional. They are knowledgeable and dedicated. It easy to see why they are rated the best.

Each day I take the elevator down to the Concourse level at the Mayo hospital in Phoenix to undergo my Proton Treatment. Each treatment takes just 20 minutes. I see a variety of fellow patients being treated for brain cancer, breast cancer, throat cancer and prostate cancer. The care exhibited by everyone from those checking you in each day to the technician providing the therapy is extraordinary. I clearly saw I made the correct choice.

I also educated myself more about Proton Technology learning, for example, that the particles energized in the Proton Accelerator are moving up speeds speed of 40-60% the speed of light before they are released to kill cancer in the patients.



Hitachi Proton Accelerator at the Mayo Clinic

Winning the Big Battle with Cancer

I believe that perhaps the easy part of this battle is choosing the right therapy or treatment. The greater battle is in your mind and coming to the realization that your diagnosis of cancer will change your life forever.

Olivia Newton-John addressed this battle when she said *"My cancer scare changed my life. I'm grateful for every new, healthy day I have. It has helped me prioritize my life."*

A friend of ours of nearly 40 years is Joni Eareckson Tada. Joni became a quadriplegic from a swimming accident in the Chesapeake Bay at the age of just 18. Books and a motion picture document the horrendous trial she went through. Her life is one courage and suffering but more importantly of tremendous blessing, service and love. She found her strength in her faith in Jesus Christ. Her ministry to other handicapped people as well everyone else she touches around the world is remarkable. Her witness is extraordinary. This is how she views challenges like confronting cancer:

"God uses suffering to purge sin from our lives, strengthen our commitment to him, force us to depend on grace, bind us together with other believers, produce discernment, foster sensitivity, discipline our minds, spend more time wisely, stretch our hope, cause us to know Christ better, make us long for the truth, lead us to the repentance of sin, teach us to give thanks in times of sorrow, increase faith and strengthen character."

Joni like many others in trials found joy in their lives despite the circumstances in which they found themselves. My favorite verse of the Bible is James 1:

"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

Isaiah, the Old Testament Prophet declared *"but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."* Martin Luther King during all of his trials declared *"Only in the darkness can you see the stars."* The fact is that we must courageously face challenges and realize they can make us better and even to appreciate more the blessings we have.

I will never forget that warm June 15 day when I learned I probably had cancer. In the subsequent days, weeks, and now months, I learned an important way to deal with this bad news is with knowledge, accurate perceptions, and the counsel of others including doctors to your friends. However, the most important step in dealing with this trial of cancer is through prayer and eternal world view as Christians. It is with an absolute trust in God for his care of us. As Joni Eareckson declares a trial like this test us, teaches us, strengthens our world view as Christians and provides us the inner strength to see this challenge through knowing that our Father in Heaven loves us and has a perfect plan for our lives.

I know that God is using the cancer that I have to mold me into a better man. I thank Him for the knowledge I have been provided to secure the treatment I am pursuing. More importantly, I thank the Lord for the values I needed to finish this journey and the hope he has given me. I believe my prognosis is good but there is no guarantee. I pray for those with cancers much more serious than mine. I see them every day here at the Mayo Clinic. I am fortunate to have the course of treatment and recovery.

I thank my family, many friends and the marvelous people at the Mayo Clinic and the University of California San Diego for their care of me through this big change in my life. I hope this paper will provide some insight and hope to others who may be getting the news that they have cancer.

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