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A Rendezvous with an Unexpected Diagnosis

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Abstract

A personal account of skin cancer explores a caregiver's emotional encounter with malignant melanoma, following her podiatrist's initial diagnosis when she presented for an ingrown toenail. (*J Patient-Centered Res Rev.* 2014;1(1):46-47.)

Key Words

Melanoma, primary care, skin cancer

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You hear the phrase “skin cancer,” or even just “cancer,” and you think, *What?! That's not me.* Honestly, I never even thought about cancer as something on the outside of your body. Three of my siblings, bless their souls, passed away from cancer, but none of them suffered from skin cancer. In my mind, cancer has always been something internal – something that just eats away at you from the inside.

On May 1, 2013, I went to see my podiatrist about an ingrown toenail. I never expected a cancer diagnosis. It all started with my podiatrist talking about a freckle on my right big toe. A freckle! He said, “Freckle,” and I said, “You mean that mole on my toe.” He said, “Freckle,” and we chuckled. All I know is that when my podiatrist asked to biopsy the odd-looking freckle on my toe, I didn't think much of it, so I agreed to the procedure. Apparently he didn't like the shape or look of it, but how bad could it really be?

Five days later, my podiatrist sure gave me something to think about. “You know that freckle on your foot?” he asked. “You mean my mole?” I said. I like to keep things personal and lighthearted with my doctors. He laughed along, but quickly grew more serious when he asked, “Would you like the good news or bad news first?” They had found skin cancer in my mole—malignant melanoma. Luckily, it was at Stage Zero, meaning it hadn't yet spread to the rest of my body.

It was frightening. I can't possibly imagine what it must be like to hear you have Stage One, Two, Three, or Four melanoma. I was a mess at Stage Zero! But for other people it just spreads through their bodies. How could they sleep at night? I can't imagine it being in my toe and moving to my liver or my lungs. But it happens. My prayers go out to every other cancer patient who went through what I went through or worse. Cancer is real, more real than I had ever realized. Just thinking about it makes me want to cry.

However, I took comfort in what my podiatrist told me. “Stage Zero,” I repeated to myself. Stage Zero. If it stayed at Stage Zero, I would be safe. Even though I knew I needed to see my recommended dermatologist soon, her main office was too far away for me since I don't have a car. *It's fine,* I thought. *I'm only at Stage Zero.*

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I finally saw my dermatologist at her Milwaukee office four weeks after being diagnosed, leaving work early to catch the bus so I could see her on time. I felt a bit anxious but I could handle it. At that point, I felt under control – until my dermatologist began fussing with me. “Well you know that's malignant and could be fatal,” she told me. She had every reason to be upset, I just didn't think about it! I thought, *Oh, Stage Zero? I've got plenty of time. I'm safe.* But in reality, none of us are really “safe” from cancer. Cancer cells exist in everybody's skin. It can affect us when we least expect it. My dermatologist was right to reprimand me; she was concerned for my life.

We immediately scheduled a pre-op and surgery for the next two weeks. I told them to put me out completely; they operated on my toe, and then I played the waiting game. Seven days. Seven days! Although standard procedure, I

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couldn't control the jittery feeling inside me. I needed the test results. Now. When those seven days were up, the nurse removed my stitches but I still didn't have an answer. I still couldn't sleep soundly at night until the day after my stitches were removed when I received a call from my nurse. "When your doctor removed your mole, she removed all of the cancer," she told me. I walked out cancer free!

"Hallelujah! I'm free!" Or so I thought. All of a sudden, this dark spot seemed to appear on my right foot overnight, just near the skin cancer. I can't lie; I panicked a little. "What is this?" I frantically asked my dermatologist. She quickly quelled my nerves, telling me I only had an age spot. "Well, what's the difference?" I asked. To this day, I still have trouble recognizing a freckle from a mole, a mole from an age spot, etc. To me, they're all just spots. I've learned to look for an irregular shape and size, but all we can really do is watch our own bodies. Watch for changes, anything abnormal, and go get it checked out. Don't wait. Sometimes I wonder, *What if I had never seen my doctor about an ingrown toenail?* What would have happened to me? All of my life I've had moles.

Not once did I think to ask my doctor to look at them. We all have to be a bit more aware and take care of ourselves.

When I realized I was truly healthy again, I thanked God, my friends, my coworkers, and my darling granddaughter who's been my private nurse through every surgery I've experienced over the past fifteen years. She cooks me breakfast, makes sure I'm healing, and more than anything, just supports me. When you experience something like a cancer diagnosis, when life suddenly seems so short, you need that support. You need those people in your life who will pray for you when you feel nothing but fear. I've worked at the same office in Aurora Health Care for 21 years, and I feel like my coworkers are family. We help each other through it all and, honestly, I couldn't have survived without my faith in God and the people around me.

Conflicts of Interest

None.

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