

# Learning to let go

## *One physician's experience with cancer*

**R. Peter Uhlmann, MD**

"Hi Peter, how's everything going?" asked one of my colleagues, a family practitioner in Powell River, BC.

"Not too bad," I replied. "Things seem to be going as expected."

"Well, since I have you as a captive audience, I'm wondering if you could provide a consultation for a woman I admitted last night. I think she needs antidepressant therapy."

I answered without hesitation. "Sure, I'll try to see her tomorrow."

A typical hospital corridor consultation? Not quite. We were in the Powell River General Hospital, but not in the corridor. I was held "captive" by the intravenous tubing in my right arm, through which an antineoplastic drug was flowing. I was receiving chemotherapy for malignant lymphoma. It was 4:30 in the afternoon, and I had just finished work for the day. For 19 years I had been working as a general psychiatrist in the community.

Why, if I had cancer, was I still working? During 6 months of chemotherapy I was off work only for about 3 weeks, 2 of which were at Christmas. During my therapy I began to realize how stressful my work was. A psychiatric resident came to work with me for 3 months; after his first day my wife, Ronnie, asked him how he felt about the experience. He said it was enjoyable and informative, but he didn't know if he could keep up with my pace. And that was a slow day!

Physicians in British Columbia receive an annual computer printout of their clinical activities for the year. This allows them to compare themselves with others in their field. In 1994 I saw almost twice the number of patients and performed almost 3 times the number of clinical services as the average general psychiatrist in BC — and I was only working a 4-day week. If stress is a factor in the cause of cancer, I was a good candidate.

But allow me to go back in time. During the summer of 1993 I travelled to Tibet with Ronnie and our 3 children, ranging in age from 16 to 23. There we trekked around the holy Mount Kailas, climbing over one pass at 5670 m. The vacation was a wonderful experience. The following summer I noticed a mild burning pain in my right groin that came and went haphazardly. As a physician I knew exactly what to do: ignore the symptoms until they become unbearable. In the fall of that year I went hiking with my older brother in BC's remote Stein Valley. The groin pain became more insistent, and I felt a lump as well. I realized I had developed an inguinal hernia, made worse by the 50-pound pack I was carrying. At such a distance from medical help, I was worried about it becoming incarcerated. Nevertheless, I reassured myself that all would be fine; I didn't even tell my brother about the hernia lest he should worry. In fact, because his breathing was sometimes laboured I insisted on carrying part of his food supply.

On my return home I saw my family physician and then a surgeon, who suggested laparoscopic repair. All went well, although I was advised that a lymph node blocking the surgical site had been removed and sent to pathology. I had always noticed generalized lymphadenopathy since a bout of mononucleosis in medical school. I was not worried.

Two weeks later I was fixing a blocked water pipe in my yard when the phone rang. It was my family physician and good friend, who with great difficulty told me that the pathology report had returned. The diagnosis was small-



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### *Experience*

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cleaved-cell lymphoma. I don't recall much of what he said after that. But I remember that day the way I remember the day Kennedy was assassinated or the day the *Challenger* exploded.

How could I have cancer? I was in my early 50s, I was in good physical condition, I didn't drink or smoke, I had practised t'ai chi for years, I was a decent guy. I felt that somehow I had failed. I even felt ashamed. Had I caused my own disease?

In this initial period of shock I struggled to get more information. I insisted that the pathology report was wrong and demanded a second opinion. I went to the British Columbia Cancer Institute in Vancouver and was

diagnosed as having stage 3 cancer after a malignant node was found in my neck. The advice I received was equivocal: I could avoid or postpone treatment until I developed more signs or symptoms, or I could undergo chemotherapy in the hope of preventing the cancer from spreading or becoming more malignant. It was my call. Feeling that I needed to "do something," I opted for chemotherapy. No one was talking cure, and everything that I read about my type of lymphoma was depressing. Remissions seemed to be brief and survival 10 years or less. The lymphoma could become widespread and more aggressive. My hold on life seemed very tenuous.

If the medical community had little to offer, the rest of the world was trying to compensate. News — especially bad news — travels fast in a small town. Many people came to see me or phoned to give advice. It seemed that they coped with their pain concerning my illness by coming forth with alleged cures. I was advised to get a suit made from special magnets with only a "north" pole. I phoned the developer of this concept, who talked to me about how I would be cured without bothering to ask me what I was suffering from. He told me of a patient who had been losing his hair and nails as a result of radiation therapy. After he started using the magnet suit this side effect disappeared. I asked why the patient was still undergoing radiation if the magnet therapy cured cancer. He had no answer. Others advised me to change my diet, to take a pound of vitamins a day, to use wheatgrass enemas or take blue green algae. Many of these remedies seemed interesting and possibly worth trying, but their sheer volume and variety was overwhelming. I began to dread seeing my friends.

Many people now looked at me differently. I had *cancer*. I found myself in the bizarre situation of trying to

make others comfortable around me. Maintaining a sense of humour helped.

I decided to try some form of alternative therapy, if only to keep people off my case. I have always respected traditional Chinese medicine, and I have lived and travelled in Taiwan and China (*Can Med Assoc J* 1992; 147:1696-8). With the help of some friends I found a doctor who practised Chinese medicine in Vancouver, who

prescribed a course of herbs to help me cope with the damaging effects of chemotherapy and boost my immune system. Ronnie and I spent an interesting few hours in Vancouver's Chinatown having the prescription made up at a tradi-

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tional pharmacy. The ingredients came from various drawers and were weighed on hand-held scales before being wrapped in paper containers. We had to buy a special earthenware pot to cook the herbs in.

Through contacts of my t'ai chi master, we phoned a doctor in Shanghai. He wanted to know about my symptoms and the medical reports in some detail. He promised to send me a powder that could cure the cancer, not just treat the symptoms. That sounded good to me. In less than a fortnight the medicine arrived. It lasted for several months. When it was almost finished and I wanted to order more, I learned that the doctor had been killed in a motor vehicle accident.

Finally I learned of a Chinese naturopathic physician in Vancouver. He seemed well versed in both Western and Chinese medicine and put me on a course of medications, many of which I am still taking. The initial medications were accompanied by a vial of white powder. When I asked about it, he said it was urea distilled from the urine of Buddhist monks!

Do these remedies work? I don't really know, but I am afraid to discontinue them in case they do. Once my course of chemotherapy was completed, my physicians had no further treatment to offer me. This is a real deficiency of Western medicine: it can treat my *cancer*, but it can't heal *me*. My family physician views alternative therapy with justifiable suspicion. I go for a medical examination every 3 months, to monitor my condition.

After chemotherapy the swelling in my lymph nodes disappeared. I am still in remission. Was it the chemotherapy, the monk's urine, t'ai chi? Who knows? One small lymph node has become evident in my neck to prevent me from being too complacent. We are "watching" it.



Cancer treatment involves many factors. The stresses I experienced as a solo psychiatrist in an isolated community had to be addressed. For years I had tried to attract another psychiatrist to Powell River to share my load. No one came. Partly this was because of a training system that encourages specialists to remain in large centres. Partly it was because of government restrictions on billing numbers that prevented many qualified physicians from relocating. I felt compelled to cope with the mental health needs of my community, however overwhelming the task might be.

Finally, after my chemotherapy ended, I made the gut-wrenching decision to quit my practice. I had been a physician for 30 years and a psychiatrist for 25. I had wanted relief from the stress of my practice, but this was not how I had envisioned things. Still, I knew that to continue in practice would kill me; retiring was the only way I could heal myself. I was grateful for the support I received from family, friends, colleagues and patients in making the decision to quit. Fortunately, another psychiatrist arrived on the scene to provide care to the community. I went on long-term disability.

What about my emotional condition? I am not naïve about death and dying. I lost both my parents in my early 20s, my father to cancer. I have specialized in grief counselling, and Ronnie and I have studied with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and assisted in her workshops. I have spent years attending individual and group therapy programs ranging from Gestalt to psychodrama to learn more about myself and heal my inner conflicts. I prided myself in taking my patients only where I had ventured myself. And, although I do not find solace in any particular religion, I have a strong belief in God.

When I was first diagnosed, I was in shock and denial. Telling my children I had cancer was very painful. I was reminded of what I experienced when my father passed away. By the time I called my brother in Denver, I could barely keep my lips moving. I hung up the phone and wept uncontrollably. Ronnie was great. After our more than 30 years together, she knew what type of support I needed and made it safe for me to express my emotions.

I just wanted it all to be a bad dream from which I would suddenly awaken. Curiously, I did not experience a lot of anger. Some cancer patients I have encountered describe their illness as a “gift” that allows them to view their lives differently and to change things for the better. I have had similar feelings, and I realize how fortunate I am to be surrounded by so much love from so many people. Still, it has not been easy for me to be on the receiving end of care.

And now my life is changing. Whereas once I resented the passing of time, now I am learning to appreciate each day. I take daily hour-long walks to the ocean; for a while I saw nature in all its beauty, but slowly old patterns of thought crept in and I began to worry

about all sorts of things. I fret about finances, about my disability insurance, about glitches in my payments, such as the time the computer “failed to generate” my cheque. These little annoyances make me a little paranoid about “the system.” On the other hand, the insurance department of the British Columbia Medical Association has been extremely helpful and understanding.

Sometimes I feel guilty about being on disability. Is cancer a sufficient excuse? Do I have to be bedridden and in constant pain to stop working? What should I be doing to justify my existence? And yet, after 56 years, I am finally getting to know myself. This is sometimes very scary: so much of my sense of self had to do with my work, my contribution to the world. At the same time, my relationship with Ronnie has deepened. She became ill with chronic fatigue syndrome after I left my practice and has only recently returned to part-time work as a therapist for children who are survivors of physical or sexual abuse. The year we had alone together was a wonderful present, despite the limitations imposed by our symptoms. Cancer has forced me to look for more spiritual meaning in my life. I have become more willing to take emotional risks. I am slowly learning to let go.

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