

Human Interest Story

Cancer Strikes Veterans, Too!

But It Is No Longer a Death Sentence

by

H. James Hulton III, USAF Officer (Captain) Vietnam Era Veteran and Cancer Patient

Cancer is a dreaded disease. The five most frequently diagnosed cancers among VA cancer patients are prostate, lung and bronchial, colorectal, urinary and bladder cancers, and skin melanomas. In Philadelphia, PA, the VA's Corporal Michael J. Cresencz Medical Center (the "Philly VA") is certainly well established in the high-quality treatment care of most types of cancer in its Radiation/Oncology Treatment Department in the sub-basement (SB) of that facility. About 350 Veteran cancer patients per year are treated by this department through its radiation therapy (RT) services.

About 11 years ago, this institution faced a firestorm of criticism in the Philadelphia Inquirer about long patient wait times for all types of medical procedures and appointments to even get treated. Since this time, the Philly VA, and VA institutions nationwide, have worked feverishly to fix these systemic shortcomings. Veterans and Americans need to know that, today, the quality of VA care exceeds non-VA care. What's more, the VA patients are more likely than patients with other types of insurance to receive cancer treatments according to current guidelines supported by the most recent scientific research. The Philly VA is in step with this process through its well-established partnership with the nearby University of Pennsylvania Medical Center.

Nationally, Veterans are more likely than individuals covered by Medicaid or private insurance to receive appropriate treatment and clinical quality-of-care once they are diagnosed with cancerous diseases. VA patients experience overall disease prognosis and treatment outcomes comparable or superior to those with other patient types of private insurance, Medicaid or Medicare. Certainly, the Philly VA Radiation/Oncology Department strives to keep in step with these national norms and provides very high-quality customer care with every Veteran patient contact.

In my own personal experience with prostate cancer, I was given a biopsy and diagnosed with this disease early summer 2018. The diagnosis was critically

important enough so that I had to postpone arthritic hip surgery I was about to have in July 2018. Over the next several weeks I had conversations with RT doctors affiliated with the University of PA Medical Center and given preparatory medication to get me ready for recommended radiation treatments. At this time, I had to come to grips with the fact that I was afflicted with cancer and had to have something done about it. I was in disbelief because most of my life I was a good athlete until my middle 50's. This was a real struggle for me. So, I had to accept the diagnosis and move on with it.

In the Philly VA RT department, I was treated with dignity and respect at the highest level. I was not in favor of receiving this radiation treatment in the first place due to my own personal beliefs, perhaps some denial. I explored facts about other kinds of treatments. It was not an easy decision to go ahead with radiation therapy treatment. However, through informative discussions with Dr. Andrew Minn, the attending physician at the RT Department, and some of his associates, I decided to proceed under their recommended 28 radiation treatments program because of the type of prostate cancer I had. My treatments began on November 29, 2018 and ended on January 9, 2019.

During this time, I had to travel to the Philly VA every week day from my home in North Wales, PA, a distance of 35 miles one way. I had to adjust my body to drinking a certain amount of water to fill my bladder just before treatment time, and make sure my bowels were emptied out as well. That certainly was a big adjustment and challenging to put in motion. After some time, I became used to the process, but occasionally there were times when I did not have enough water in my bladder and had to wait in the department waiting room until I did have enough. Additionally, the women workers in the Transport Department on the main floor providing wheelchair service came to know and recognize me upon my arrival at the VA. They welcomed me, signed me in (they knew me by name and didn't even ask me for that anymore), promptly transported me to the RT Department in the sub-basement, and signed me in. I did not have to sign myself in there either. They did it for me! Such great service!

While in the RT department waiting room, I met quite a few other Veterans going through the same process as I. Some, however, were scheduled for more treatments, 44, as opposed to my 28. Their conditions seemed to be far worse than mine. Their PSA (Prostate Specific Antigen) readings were higher than mine, in some cases significantly higher. I felt somewhat relieved that, if they could survive

their cancer condition and treatments, I could survive mine. Even though the other Veterans were complete strangers to me, there seemed to be a bond that developed as we kept on meeting in the waiting room for our scheduled turn at subsequent radiation treatments. It didn't take long because most of us came from the similar Vietnam Era timeframe and each of us were proud Veterans having served our country honorably. **Nobody truly knows a Veteran like another Veteran!**

The Radiation Technicians in the therapy room also were great to get to know during this treatment process. Throughout the entire time, I developed the certain feeling that I was going to miss those people once my treatments ended, but not the process of having to come into the Philly VA every week day to get my treatments during the middle of the day. The technicians also seemed to have extensive working experience performing the treatments and knew what they were doing to handle all us Veterans, one at a time. Two such technicians were Paul T. and Beth M. When asked about their service to Veterans and how they benefitted them over a period of years, Paul indicated "I have served more than two thousand Veterans over ten years, and I feel that I can get a good rapport with our Veterans, help them relax during a tough time in their lives. No one ever came here just to bother us with their cancer. We have a good team, and we take good care of them. I hope I can continue doing this until I retire." Beth noted that "I have been here almost eleven years and have seen over 2200 Veterans. Serving them is an honor for me, being patriotic, and it is very rewarding. We see them coming back year after year for their follow-ups. When they come here initially, they are fearful and don't know what to expect. We make them feel at ease, make them feel like family. This may sound strange, but they do enjoy coming here. It's a great job!"

The Bravery Bell

At the close of their treatment sessions, Veterans get to ring the Bravery Bell in a room adjacent to the Waiting Room. For me, it was a significant event because I had completed a life-changing process in an effort to heal and cure me of my prostate cancer. Many Veterans before me rang this bell, and many after me will do the same. Like other Veterans, I also received a "Graduation Certificate" from the Veterans Health Administration proclaiming my accomplishment.

While I was ringing the Bravery Bell, I had recited the following passage:

“For Whom the Bell Tolls:

It tolls for all the Veterans who have passed through the Philadelphia VA Radiation/Oncology Department and received such wonderful service to have their lives saved;

It tolls for all the Veterans who are coming through the Philadelphia VA Radiation/Oncology Department today and all the future tomorrows to get this great service;

And it tolls for ME, a grateful Veteran!”



Jim ringing the Bravery Bell after completing his 28 radiation therapy treatments in the Philadelphia, PA VA Radiation/Oncology Department January 9, 2019.