

No Laughing Matter

Category: Crying

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | March 31, 2017

“You need a fifth surgery,” the maxillofacial surgeon tells me. “Heterotopic bone is again growing over your prosthetic device.”

For eight years I have endured intense pain in my left jaw. While having four surgeries, I have also undergone Botox treatment, acupuncture and physical therapy; taken a variety of medications prescribed by pain doctors, neurologists and my primary care physician; and used specially made creams, ice and heat on the affected area. Nothing has worked.

And now I face surgery number five.

It would be a more intense version of surgery number four, my doctor explains: He would remove the prosthetic, clean out the bone, take fat from my stomach to make a cushion in my head, then replace the prosthetic. This time, he would cut more deeply, trying to make a larger separation between the bone roots to prevent a reconnection of the bone. He would insert a custom-made device, he says, jokingly adding—in an attempt to reduce my stress—that “if anyone ever accuses you of having a big mouth, just send them to me!” He might also bring in a radiation oncologist within twenty-four hours of the surgery to zap my head in two spots, as a way to prevent a reoccurrence of the bone growth.

I sit in my surgeon’s office, a place that has become all too familiar to me. I struggle to open my mouth so he can measure its width, but I am unable to do so with any degree of success. I feel him hold my hand and hear his words of sympathy for my ongoing nightmare.

And I cry. I shed tears because my beloved dad, who has come to every previous appointment with me, no longer sits in the visitor’s chair in the exam room; he died on November 1. I shed tears because I am tired of living with chronic pain—of having to choose which activities to do and which to eliminate on a daily basis because I need my energy to cope with spasms in my head, constant headaches, and burning that emanates from the site of the previous surgeries. I shed tears because I feel hopeless, as if each surgery pulls me deeper into the quicksand; I fear the fifth might pull me under. And I shed tears at my untenable choice: live with the pain or risk a fifth surgery.

I do not know what to do.

Ronna Edelstein

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania