

A Haunting Disease

Category: Cancer

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | June 1, 2021

I never told my father that his physicians had diagnosed him with pancreatic cancer. Since he was ninety-eight years old, I decided that telling him would only cause him profound mental and emotional anguish—a fear that would diminish however long he had to live but would not alter the reality. To have Dad endure rounds of chemotherapy or radiation at his age would also be physically cruel.

Most of all, I did not tell Dad because not even the doctors were one-hundred percent certain of their diagnosis.

For months, Dad had experienced attacks that left him light-headed and disoriented. By giving him something to drink or eat, I was able to bring him back to reality. Although I told his primary care physician about these frightening episodes, he dismissed them as the concerns of an overly-emotional and loving daughter. Then, while leaving his office after a check-up, Dad had an incident in the waiting room; within minutes, a physician's assistant had wheeled him to the emergency room.

A multitude of tests led to the rare diagnosis of insulinoma. When Dad's blood sugar plummeted, he required sugar and/or protein to stabilize him. I had to wake him up every two hours at night to feed him; otherwise, an untreated attack could have led to a coma and even death.

That is when the words "pancreatic cancer" started to be bandied about. The doctors believed that the insulinoma resulted from this lethal cancer. While the diagnosis was a curse, it was also a blessing. It enabled me to care for Dad at home while receiving at-home hospice assistance. A cancer diagnosis brings out the A-team—nurses, physical and occupational therapists, a clergyman/counselor, aides—to help the caregiver and the patient.

Dad, who never suffered physical pain, is now at peace, but his cancer diagnosis has made it impossible for me to achieve peace. The deaths of individuals—ranging from celebrities like Alex Trebek to regular people who could be my neighbors—from pancreatic cancer scare me. When I fill out a family history form at a doctor's office, my hand shakes as I debate whether to check "cancer" as part of my family's biography. Just as I worry about inheriting the dementia that afflicted my mother and her sisters, so do I fear getting the cancer that perhaps led to Dad's passing.

Pancreatic cancer haunts me.

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