The Picture of Health

Cash continued to paint and exhibit his work throughout the time he received treatment. "I've never been one good at sitting still," he says.

As an Eisenhower Medical Center patient, Cash Baxter was definitely in the spotlight, although it was not quite the kind to which he was accustomed. His emotional journey from prostate cancer diagnosis to unexpected complications would have left many daunted. This former Thespian, however, decided to take a showbiz approach. He put total confidence in his cast of caregivers, faced the life lesson and went on with the show.

With a name like Cash Baxter, (and yes, it is his real name) it is not surprising that his life's work is spent in the theatrical and creative arts. Yet Cash probably never dreamed one day he would play a starring role in a rare medical mystery that would take dedicated medical staff to solve.

A former actor and internationally known theater producer and director (including Broadway and off Broadway productions) and award-winning multi-media artist, Cash's journey began in 2003 during a routine physical exam. "I had no symptoms whatsoever and my regular internist said my prostate-specific antigen (or PSA) level was a little elevated," recalls Cash."He said it could be a bladder infection and prescribed antibiotics."When Cash returned to his physician after taking the antibiotics, the PSA was even more elevated. "He recommended I see a urologist."

Cash wondered if his family history was coming back to haunt him. His father died of prostate and colon cancer at 83. "It took five years for the cancer to take my dad,"Cash recalls, "and they didn't have all the modern treatments they have now, otherwise he probably would have lived."

Cash's doctor suggested a biopsy, which revealed microscopic traces of cancer. The cancer was so small that Cash was told he didn't have to do anything right away. He was, however, encouraged to get a second opinion. "Even though the cancer was small, it was still cancer," says Cash. He recalls the support of Dr. Betty Baxter, his wife of 48 years. "I am very fortunate to have had her, the love of my life, to completely support me and calm me down from the panic that I went into. She said, 'We're going to get whatever opinions we need and take the appropriate action.' That made me feel better."

Cash got a second opinion, and it was confirmed that the cancer was tiny enough that he could wait for treatment. However, the physician thought that with Cash's family history, he would be a perfect candidate for a treatment being done at Eisenhower Medical Center known as External Beam Radiation Therapy (EBT).

Betty, who already knew Alison Sachs, MSW, OSW-C, Community Outreach Director at Eisenhower Lucy Curci Cancer Center, called to schedule an appointment for Cash. "I still remember Alison telling me 'The bad news is you have cancer. The good news is it's stage two prostate cancer, which tends to be slow growing, giving you plenty of time to consult with your doctors to discuss your treatment options.' I was so completely confident in the people there and the way I was handled from the outset," says Cash. He was presented with treatment options and the various side effects he might experience. "The surroundings were so warm and the people were friendly. They told me there were no guarantees but said that this treatment is what has been recommended for me, and there was such confidence on the part of the staff. That confidence transferred to me."

Cash went on to receive 37 EBT treatments at Eisenhower Lucy Curci Cancer Center. "I had such experts helping me, and we kept laughing right through it. When things got a little unnerving regarding the external beam therapy I would just relate to my theater background and think 'This is just a terrific rehearsal for a science fiction film. It is a great new adventure. Now stand back and get my lighting right.'"

Cash's 37 treatments were all done consecutively on the five-day work week for eight weeks. As he was wrapping up his final treatments, Cash started to have some unexplained bleeding. "What made his case interesting is less than two percent of men treated for prostate cancer develop complications," notes John Stevenson, MD, Board Certified Radiation Oncologist at Eisenhower's Arnold Palmer Prostate Center, "but Cash fell into that two percent." Cash had a 13-millimeter (about one-half inch) radiation ulcer involving the anal canal that was not healing. That is how Cash Baxter became a star patient at Eisenhower Medical Center. His case became one that physicians would meet about and discuss on a regular basis.

Cash first underwent an experimental freezing procedure using cold gas to minimize the bleeding. Unfortunately, the procedure did not work and Cash began developing anemia. Still, he maintained his daily routines, teaching a full schedule with the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at California State University, San Bernardino Palm Desert Campus where he is a Master Teacher of the plein air style as well as a teacher of art history and impressionism. He also taught Acting for the Camera workshops in Palm Springs, and he was continuing to paint and exhibit his work throughout the period of time he received treatment. "I've never been one good at sitting still," says Cash. "During that time I just had to look for the men's room first when I went to a new place, but I made it work."

In the meantime, he was becoming severely anemic and at one point required numerous transfusions. "It was a most unusual circumstance," says Cash. "I had so many people working to find out how to get me well. I began a series of CBCs [blood tests] and was very carefully monitored." Cash's physicians, Dr. Stevenson and Eisenhower's Michael Last, MD, Board Certified in General Surgery, consulted and made a recommendation. Dr. Last proposed that he perform a colostomy (a surgical opening from the colon to the abdominal wall), bypassing the bowel to give the ulcer a chance to heal completely. If successful, the colostomy could be removed in six to 12 months. "This was a very difficult decision for me,"Cash recalls. "I resisted it for a long time."

Then, he experienced tremendous pain. "Cash had an ulcer in the rectum that was causing pain," explains Dr. Last. Cash decided to proceed with the colostomy and wore the device for 11 months. He was carefully monitored, and in March 2006, Dr. Last took down the colostomy. "The procedure improved Cash's condition, making the bleeding minimal and manageable," says Dr. Last.

Cash feels an enormous amount of gratitude for the people who helped him through his ordeal. "I'm dropping in on my doctors and nurses all the time. We know each other. We're family," he says. As a way to give back to his newfound family, Cash loaned more than 15 of his paintings to the Eisenhower Lucy Curci Cancer Center and periodically rotates the collection. "I noticed a bare nail one day and was told it was a spot where a holiday decoration had been hung. I thought a painting was a small way I could say thank you for all they've done for me."

Cash is not at all ruffled by the fact that he was among the two percent of men who experienced complications."What was a very simple procedure and very precise, I simply reacted to with a bit of bad luck.What happened to me was highly unusual. As patients we must trust our physicians. I was lucky to have a place as supportive as Lucy Curci Cancer Center.What a joy it is to know you're in the right hands. I am also lucky to have Betty, who dealt with my ups and downs and kept me on the right track. I have been so fortunate all my life to have fans and admirers of my work. Now it is my turn. I am a forever fan of the people and the teamwork at Eisenhower Medical Center."

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