

Powerful Patient 2008 week 29

Host: Joyce Graff, WebTalkRadio.net

Living Through Chemotherapy

Rena Blumberg Olshansky, a retired radio broadcaster from Cleveland, Ohio, has survived cancer three times. She wrote a book about her experience with chemotherapy, to give hope to others, and to share her vision of life as a celebration. “Believe in your strength. You hold the key.”

1) About Our Guest

Rena Blumberg was a radio broadcaster and mother of two when she was first diagnosed with cancer in 1975. At that time the standard of care was lumpectomy first, followed if indicated by mastectomy, with optional follow-up with chemotherapy or radiation if the disease had spread.

In 1975 she underwent a lumpectomy only, and was told nothing more was needed. In 1977, though, the cancer was back. This time it was mastectomy followed by two years of chemotherapy. In those days, chemotherapy was much more rugged than today, as the drugs were not as well targeted and had more and worse side effects.

In 1996 she had another bout of breast cancer, this time treated with radiation. Her strong spirit, her faith, and her circle of family and family-of-choice have worked together to bring her through these periods of illness and back into her full, rich, and colorful life.

Copies of *Headstrong* were distributed for free through several cancer support organizations. The book is currently out of print, but copies are available through Amazon.com for \$3-\$7 each. Search Amazon for “Rena Blumberg headstrong” http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_ss_b?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=rena+blumberg+headstrong&x=0&y=0

2) About Chemotherapy

There is a great deal of information on the internet concerning chemotherapy. For the best general overview, see Wikipedia, or the National Cancer Institute.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chemotherapy>
<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/chemotherapy-and-you/page2>



Rena Blumberg Olshansky

The best source of information on your particular situation will come from your medical doctors, who are tailoring treatment for you. They should be able to guide you in learning about the particular regimen they are suggesting, and what to expect. You might want to ask whether you can speak to another person who has successfully undergone this therapy. Many hospitals also have a Patient Resource Room where staff can assist you in finding information about the course of therapy being recommended for you.

Most of the other sites are sponsored by pharmaceuticals. That does not make them wrong, but it does mean that they will likely want you to use their product. So be sure to take their information with that awareness, and confirm with your doctor whether their product is indeed necessary or beneficial for you.

Generalized information about chemotherapy may or may not be relevant for you, since there are many kinds of chemotherapy. Chemotherapy is a term that simply means treating an illness with a chemical or drug. First generation chemotherapy treatments for cancer are generally targeted at halting the fastest-growing cells in your body – namely the cancer cells. However they also affect other fast-growing cells such as hair follicles and the lining of the intestinal tract. Additional medications can be used to help moderate the side-effects.

Some newer chemotherapy treatments, such as anti-angiogenic drugs, target a more specific process within the cell that may be relevant to your particular disease. Cancer is more than 100 different diseases. What works for one of these may not work for another. What works for one type of leukemia, for example, may not work at all for another type. What works for a person with a particular genetic make-up may not work for another. We are still learning every day about how best to treat the cancer. People who participate in clinical trials can help us learn.

3) Saving Your Own Life

You can and should participate in the research and decision-making about your treatment. Your doctors can guide you, but you can ask more intelligent questions, and understand better what is happening to you if you read the articles they suggest and go to the Patient Resource Room yourself.

Beyond the medical realities, you will need to draw upon all the resources inside yourself in order to survive whatever disease and treatment you are dealing with. Your body is fighting a battle – you will need to engage fully in this battle and give your body every possible chance to win.

In *Headstrong* Rena makes some excellent suggestions, and gives real-life examples of how she applied these suggestions in her own life.

- Purpose, creativity, and the will to live considerably enhance longevity.
- Optimism and involvement in the world are the best life insurance policies.

- Everyone needs close friends. Within a small circle of important people we learn to nurture and to accept nurturing in return. It's never too late to reach out. Don't be afraid to call on them in times of crisis or in times of joy.
- Families are important to us in times of trouble and triumph. Relatives do not always live nearby. You can fill the void by building an extended family-of-choice. These are close friends who choose life and live together united in mutual support, encouragement, attention, and affection.
- Rena strongly suggests that anyone going through serious illness stay close to home. A cheerful, organized, personal home can provide a consistent source of peace and security, both of which are primary requirements when battling disease.
- Appearance is the barometer of how we feel about ourselves and a measure of how well we take care of our bodies. Don't smoke; use alcohol in moderation. She has found that the better cancer patients take care of their bodies, the brighter the colors they wear, the better they eat, the better able they are to cope with the ravages of the disease and the debilitating side effects of the cure.
- Every person needs time alone. Private time is necessary for thinking about goals and priorities. It doesn't matter when the private moments are found, the important thing is to take them.
- Death is difficult to face. For anyone fighting a chronic disease, the notion of confronting one's own mortality eventually becomes necessary in order to face the future with any kind of equanimity. The only way I can imagine dealing with death is through a developed, internalized belief system. My religious convictions were a strong source of strength to me, and I urge everyone to revitalize their own religious resources to aid in the battle.
- Managing time demands an acute awareness of goals and priorities. Everyone must juggle various roles, but the moment illness intrudes in one's life, the juggling becomes more difficult and the management of one's time more important. One is more fatigued and often in pain. Ask for the help you need. Be sure to schedule joyful events into your busy life.
- I have come to believe that stress and the inability to confront it may have contributed to my disease. The important thing is to acknowledge that certain life events are stressful, face them, and deal with them in a suitable way. A stress overload can create a drop in physical immunity levels. We all need energy, strength, and vitality to maintain a healthy, active, productive life.
- To me volunteering is simply returning a favor. I am a firm believer that everyone has an obligation to put back, in some small way, into the community what she or he has received from it. Young or old, male or female, volunteering gives purpose and expanded dimension to your life. Aches and pains are temporarily forgotten because you are thinking and doing for someone else.
- Support groups are essential – networking with others who are going through the same experience. To be able to share what I learned with others and to learn from them enhanced my ability to stay in control, to survive.
- Celebrating and celebrations allow us to create, to be joyous, to work together within the circle of our relationships. When each moment and fragment is savored and experienced deeply, not rushed over in a headlong drive to cope or suppress and not submerged in anticipation of a tomorrow, each day is a treasure

with its own gift of hours to be stretched and experienced. Therefore, daily life must be a packed mosaic of celebrations.

“I smile a lot, through my aura of protective lavender. As I face each new day with confidence and vigor, much of it gained through this living, giving, experience of self-activated survival, I am headstrong – through the resources of my faith, the impetus of my hope and optimism, and the remarkable clarity achieved through my work [of self-discovery].” – *Rena Blumberg Olshansky*

4) Ways to Enhance Healing

Explore all Adjuvant (post-surgical medical) therapies available through your doctor, as well as complementary (non-medical) therapies.

Caution: Anyone who is undergoing chemotherapy *must* tell the oncologist about *all* health food supplements you are considering taking, as there can be negative interactions between certain vitamins and herbs and the chemotherapy drugs you are taking. Do not take anything you have not cleared with your doctor, no matter how harmless it may seem. As one example, grapefruit can enhance the action of certain drugs, essentially causing an overdose.

Some complementary therapies suggested by Rena:

Health Journeys guided imagery tapes by Belleruth Naparstek,
<http://www.healthjourneys.com/>

Reiki is a Japanese method of stress reduction that can enhance healing.
<http://www.reiki.org/FAQ/WhatIsReiki.html>

Acupuncture is a traditional Chinese discipline. The ancient Chinese believed that there is a universal life energy called Chi or Qi present in every living creature. This energy is said to circulate throughout the body along specific pathways that are called meridians. As long as this energy flows freely throughout the meridians, health is maintained, but once the flow of energy is blocked, the system is disrupted and pain and illness occur. Imagine rivers that flood and cause disasters or an electrical grid short-circuiting that causes blackouts. Acupuncture works to “re-program” and restore normal functions by stimulating certain points on the meridians in order to free up the Chi energy. Surgery, while necessary to remove the cancer, cuts through some of the meridians. Working with an acupuncturist to restore the flow of chi can be invigorating and enhancing to the healing process. <http://www.acupuncture.com/education/tcmbasics/whatisacu.htm>