

“You’ll Catch Your Death of Cold.” Really. (But Not Really.) — Part Three

I can’t think of a single positive reason one would ever go to an oncologist.

December 19, 2019 By [Jeff Neurman](#)

After being discharged from the hospital with no more knowledge than what I went in with — other than I didn’t have the flu (and, yes, of course, I had gotten my flu shot before) — I went home and tried to start recuperating from whatever this was that was so afflicting me. My plans for convalescence were regrettably quite premature.

That night I barely slept a wink. In fact, I was so uncomfortable that I did not even bother to try. Lying down was completely infeasible as I could not breathe and coughed even more and although as a dad I am generally quite adept at falling asleep in any form of armchair — particularly with the television on — even that home formula for Ambien failed me. It was one of those nights where you wish it were already day — despite how unbelievably tired you are — because at least then you can give up the charade of trying to sleep. And you can also complain to others about how little sleep you got.

Once the dawn finally broke, I was hoping my fever would do likewise. But no such luck. All morning I fought to keep it in check but to no avail. When Tylenol failed to produce any decrease in my core temp, I was forced to turn to Advil. Of course, Advil on an empty stomach is a recipe for all manner of other issues, and at this stage I was confident I had enough discomfort that I did not need to add relocating to the bathroom to the list. But having no other means to try and get the fever down to a respectable level, I was forced to eat something. That something was a banana, which is all I ate for the better part of about a week. Just one banana a day or, in a rare fit of ravenousness, two. But even the post-banana Advil produced no results.

In light of all of this, Melissa encouraged me to call my oncologist. I think this was borne mostly out of the notion that this type of infection might not be so unusual for someone who had not all that long ago completed chemotherapy. But, of course, voluntary contact with an oncologist is, in my book, never desirable. Nonetheless, I was becoming desperate and, since Melissa is of course much smarter than I, I acquiesced. I left a message with one of my doctor’s secretaries and then went on with my suffering.

The end of the miserable day came and went but, unprecedentedly, without a call from my oncologist. Since I was far from eager to talk with her anyway, I was not too troubled by this lack

of interaction. Yet the next morning, with no change in either how I felt or my temperature, Melissa had had enough. She called my oncologist herself, which frankly I preferred anyway. Much to my horror, however, I was then told by my doctor, through my wife, that I must come in.

I can't think of a single positive reason one would ever go to an oncologist. No visit to see an oncologist is ever a good thing. But an emergency, surprise visit is quite possibly the least desirable of them all. Nothing fills me with more feelings of dread and discomfort than going to see the cancer doctor. Particularly now, while I still had another month of freedom before my next scheduled visit, I was being compelled to go in. I tried protesting to my doctor's secretary, but she would hear none of it. So off I trudged to my least favorite place on earth. Except for maybe the Meadowlands.

Once I arrived, it was like my normal routine except intensified. This time they were not satisfied with merely extracting gallons of my blood. Now they wanted other fluids from me, specifically the kind left over after cleaning one's blood. Unfortunately, I had not foreseen this turn of events and thus was forced to gulp several cups of water to be able to perform for this new test. (I didn't know that a hematologist was qualified to conduct a urinalysis but I guess one learns something new every day.)

While waiting very anxiously on my lab results, which was probably the only way possible to make a bad situation worse, my doctor and her current fellow (the doctor kind, not the gender type) started examining me. In the midst of this, the bloodwork came back and while a normal person's white cell count might well have been quite high, mine was still below where it should be. That damn chemo really did its thing. In the meantime, I was told that my blood would be sent off to some faraway lab for tests for more exotic ailments, none of which I had ever heard of and, spoiler alert, I didn't end up having. After examining me and reviewing the initial bloodwork, my oncologist told me that she was glad to say that my "illness was not a recurrence of my cancer."

I was born with a very special ability, which is to take something positive and make it into something terrible. It's truly a gift. Applied to the instant situation, what my doctor said was "Your sickness is not caused by a return of your cancer;" what I heard was, "Your cancer could come back and I was concerned enough that this might be the case to examine you." I had never even considered the possibility that my sickness could be the cancer itself. A result of the depleted and pathetic immune system I have from the chemo, sure. But the cancer back so soon? Now I really had something to worry about each time I sneeze. Thanks for nothing.

Unfortunately, the doctor was not yet done with me. Actually, she was done with me but I was not done as she then sent me across the street to my second hospital in three days for my second set of x-rays in the same span, because more radiation and waiting was just what I was in the mood for. Apparently there was some concern that the x-rays taken while wearing my pee-gown on Sunday might not have gotten my entire lungs. (Evidently, I have especially lengthy lungs.) So, after again protesting in vain, I trudged off sullenly to the radiation department in yet another hospital.

I do not know what aspiring hospital administrator came up with the idea of shuffling patients between multiple waiting rooms, but that person should be made to traipse through them the next time s/he has a high fever and total exhaustion, ideally while wearing a hospital gown that only fastens in the rear. It is really cruel and seemingly pointless to start a poor patient in one waiting room and then continually march him through ever smaller waiting rooms until it is just the patient, a too-loud television and one other person who looks like they won't make it long enough to get to the test for which they are waiting. This waiting-room-disguised-as-Matryoshka dolls is unnecessary and mean-spirited. After waiting for seemingly an eternity, you finally are called only to find yourself looking for a new seat with a different cast of sick people who are in even closer quarters. And in my pre-radiation case, I had three of these nesting dolls to work my way through before making it to the dubious prize at the end — the freezing cold x-ray room. At this point I was asked by a person — I assume she was a technician of some sort but she did not self-identify and I did not want to commit a faux pas by assigning a title to her person — if I were there for a follow-up. “Yes?” I guessed. I really didn't know what she meant, but I figured that it wouldn't change the type of picture they took of the inside of my chest cavity so I went with it. Another spoiler alert — they found nothing on this x-ray either.

I managed to get home without passing out behind the wheel, which is harder said than done because we do live in the greater NYC area where new drivers are only taught offensive driving techniques. I tried to sleep on the couch when I came in but I was now so tired that even sleep escaped me. I was miserable, traumatized, drained of all manner of bodily fluids, feverish and now, glowing slightly.

The next day the oncologist left a message to inform me that the additional tests revealed neither mono, Dengue Fever, malaria nor any other identifiable malady. I was just suffering from a vicious — but undetermined — illness. Some might call this a “bug,” but I don't think that term does it justice. Whatever it was, it hung on for quite some time — like a bug might do, actually — before I gradually began to regain some strength, the ability to eat three bananas in a day and, not unimportantly, the capacity to actually get air into my lungs once again. I seemed headed for a slow, but steady, recovery. Of course, Thanksgiving — a major family affair hosted by yours truly — was just a few days down the road so I was far from out of the woods yet.

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