The Recovery

Orchiectomy complete and testicular cancer still unconfirmed, I had to recover.

January 12, 2017 By Justin Birckbichler

As soon as I got home from surgery, I took my first round of Percocet. When I took my Vicodin when I had wisdom teeth, it had a huge effect on me. It killed all pain and also made me loopy. The same was true with the Percocet, which knocked the pain down to a minor discomfort. However, it caused no other side effects. Between the Percocet and the local anesthesia still in my body, for the first day, I was in little pain overall.

Each of the following days had a different level of pain. When the anesthesia wore off, more pain hit me. When I switched to Advil versus Percocet, more pain hit me. At times, the pain was overbearing and hard to manage. You don't realize how important your core and your groin are for everyday movement until it's cut open. Sometimes I could walk, sometimes I couldn't. Mallory had to more or less do everything for me for the first two days. She would bring me food in bed, my toothbrush, change my clothes, help me to the bathroom (or bring a bucket if I couldn't make it), and literally anything else. Without her, I don't know what I would have done for this whole recovery process.

Small, but important improvement

I made it a goal to move a little more each day. The day of the surgery, I only made it to the bathroom and back. The following day, I was able to walk around the room. A few days after that, I was able to do stairs. Each day I pushed it further, but I always felt the consequences of that choice shortly thereafter.

I am a fiercely independent person. That is one thing I have struggled with most in this whole recovery process. I like people doing things for me if I so choose, but if I have to be dependent on others, I highly dislike it. I am embarrassed that I had to pee in a bucket sometimes because I did not have the strength to get to the bathroom, but I felt safe and secure while doing so. I always have told Mallory she is the only person I feel I have been able to be 100% vulnerable with, and this experience proved it. However, my experience was not as pleasant as the "bucket filling" (rewards for positive and kind actions) endeavors my elementary school was starting on.

Mistakes were made

Even though everyone told me to rest up, I wanted to gain back my independence as much as I could. I wanted to walk alone and have my full range of motion, but the pain wasn't something I could ignore. The two worst moments of agony happened within 24 hours of each other. The first

was when I tried to shower. This was 3 days post-surgery and 4 days since my last shower. I'm sure I smelled lovely by then. I hadn't fully mastered standing for extended periods of time yet, but I needed to shower. I realized all of my strength needed to be spent standing, so Mallory would need to actually wash me.

As soon as I entered the shower, I knew I had made a terrible mistake. The act of standing for five minutes was excruciating, not to mention the heat from the water made everything hurt even more. Somehow, we got through it and I got out to dry off. More pain. Exhausted, I made it back to bed.

In the afternoon on Monday, my mom came down to help out. Mallory was going back to work the following day, and I was not ready to be left alone, as much as I wanted my independence. I will be forthcoming in admitting that without both of them, I would have had a miserable week. Case in point: after Mal went to work the following morning, I had to sneeze. Not thinking, I let it fly and the pressure and sudden body movement produced such a strong amount of pain that I screamed out. I don't think I've ever seen my mom move that fast.

Regaining more control

A typical day of recovery followed the same sort of pattern. I would wake up and have breakfast brought to me. After that, I took some sort of pain meds and watched Netflix or a movie for a while. Then, I'd write to my students on Google Classroom. That usually killed about an hour. I really enjoyed and looked forward to writing back and forth to them. I learned a lot about them and forged even deeper relationships with them, even though I wasn't even in the room. Each and every one of them showed genuine concern and worry for me, even though at that point, they thought I was out for a routine leg surgery. I truly have some awesome students.

Once I was done with writing, I usually tried to get some walking in. Some days would be better than others, but I always needed to ice my incision immediately afterwards. The remainder of the day would be spent resting, reading, watching TV or movies, and playing video games. I read about four books, watched over ten movies, and beat one video game. Under normal circumstances, this sounds like an ideal way to spend a day, but it loses its luster after about five days of being limited to only that. Thirteen days is akin to torture. I tried to spend time sleeping, but pain had a tendency to wake me up in the middle of the night and during naps.

Thinking about facing down testicular cancer

I also spent a great deal of time thinking about what had just happened. Medical professionals have no idea what causes cancer. As I mentioned, this makes it hard to believe in a higher power because it doesn't seem fair. I know my situation could be much worse and I'm thankful that it's not. I also know it's such a cliche to say, "Why me?" But cancer gives a person a lot to process in a short amount of time. However, the brevity of this whole thing has been somewhat of a blessing. I have only had time to act, not to react. On the whole, I deal with life logically. Worrying wouldn't give me any less cancer, so I didn't worry. I wondered why this happened, but I know ultimately, I would never know and that speculation doesn't help.

At times, I was angry and irritable, not because of the pain but for the injustice cancer was to me. However, I also didn't sink into sadness or despair. I was upset about losing my independence briefly and for losing a part of me, but I was never truly sad. Every time someone asked me how I was doing, they were always shocked at me handing it with humor and positivity. This attitude lends itself to numerous jokes and I would prefer to handle my cancer diagnosis with a positive outlook rather than being downtrodden about it. People might say that's me masking my pain, and to an extent it is, but this is also how I am choosing to deal with my cancer.

Testicular cancer is officially confirmed

On Wednesday, November 2, five days after surgery, Dr. Dumont called. The biopsy had been completed and it was confirmed — I had cancer. My mom was with me that day, and she asked me repeatedly if I was ok. I was entirely ok; almost relieved. My gut instinct had been confirmed. I was now officially a cancer patient.

To be perfectly honest, I don't know how I would have handled it if it came back negative. I had been through a massive surgery and a painful recovery. To do all of that and lose what I did, only to find out it was all for naught, would have been more devastating than hearing the words "you officially have cancer."

Click here to read the next part of my story, in which I share about telling more people of my diagnosis.

On Thursdays, I am chronicling my journey from discovery to the beginning of chemotherapy. To read through my story up until this point, please click here.

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