There’s Snow News Like Good News

Winter Storm Diego brings me two days off from work… and a set of clean scans! I’m still testicular cancer-free!

December 11, 2018 By Justin Birckbichler

The weatherman predicted one to three inches of snow from Winter Storm Diego. In actuality, we received closer to six. With either amount, this equalled one thing — a snow day on Monday, December 10, 2018. Even though I transitioned out of the fourth grade classroom at the end of last year and into an instructional technology coaching role for this school year, I still reap the benefits of school closings.

However, the icy conditions and blanket of snow represented more than just a day off to me. I was scheduled to have bloodwork, my next CT scan, and a phone call for the Crush It for Curtis Foundation Board of Directors all after school on Monday. Realizing that I could shift everything up to earlier in the day, I made a call to Dr. Maurer’s office and the medical imaging place to see if I could bump my appointments to earlier in the day.

Getting my medical tests done on Monday

Dr. Maurer’s office offered me a slot at 11:45 am, which I happily took. The medical imaging place couldn’t guarantee me an early slot, but advised me to just “show up and see if we can fit you in.” Quite the ballsy move — I approved.

Soon after I got off the phone with the imaging center, Dr. Maurer’s office called back. I was thinking they could offer me an even earlier slot, but instead they had some bad news. Dr. Maurer was not going to be in on Friday for my scheduled follow-up.

However, this bad news was headed off at the pass and they said they could give me an appointment on Tuesday. Not only was I able to get my medical tests done earlier on Monday, I wouldn’t have to wait four days for results. Talk about baller status.

I got my blood drawn at Dr. Maurer’s office (even earlier than I was supposed to be there, which may surprise some of my co-workers since I am habitually late to meetings) and showed up at the imaging place around 11:40 am. Luckily, barium for pre-scan prep has been eliminated, so I just needed to drink a bunch of water before my scan, and that’s fine by me. I checked in and the receptionist said they were having trouble finding my appointment.

“Yeah… I’m a little early,” I said.

“What time is your scheduled time?” she asked.

“Um… 5:45 pm. But the guy on the phone said I could just show up!”

Long story short, they were able to work me in. After getting an IV put in, requesting my traditional “CT scan pic,” following the directions from the CT machine about breathing protocols, and heading out, my medical tests were all done…. well before 12:30, which is around my normal lunch time. Diego, you’re the real MVP.

As I drove to the gym for an earlier workout, I realized that I had not experienced any scanxiety in the lead up to this scan day. In fact, the only thing I had been stressed about before this day was that I was not going to be able to get to the gym, had these snow days not occurred. I suppose becoming accustomed to scans is all part of my “new normal.”

I got another call later that evening, which was far too many phone calls for one day, in my opinion. However, the message it brought was a welcome one — another snow day for Tuesday! Diego, you’re both the hero I needed and deserved. Don’t ever change.

Receiving the results on Tuesday

The next morning, I ate breakfast, headed to the gym, picked up my turkey to begin thawing for my annual “Friendsgivingmas” on Saturday, and drove to Dr. Maurer’s office. Soon after being seated in a room, he entered and told me that my scans were clear.

One set of lymph nodes is still on the higher side of normal size and one of my tumor markers were slightly elevated as compared to June’s scan, but on the whole, everything is looking great. Most importantly, my risk of recurrence drops significantly now that I have been in remission for about two years.

He asked how I was doing with the antidepressants and I said that they definitely were helping since the dosage was increased in January. I also told him about how I’ve been struggling with lingering effects of chemo brain, specifically short term memory problems and ability to focus.

Dr. Maurer shared that more research is being done into this phenomenon, but preliminary reports show that brain exercise programs, such as Lumosity or similar, can be helpful. However, my pun game remains strong, and that’s what really matters.

I also got to see Nurse Jen, and later found out that it was her birthday, so here’s another happy birthday message!

Reflecting on this scan and looking towards the future

In a month, I have another appointment for blood work to check on the aforementioned elevated tumor marker. Beyond that day, I will have a full panel of blood work in six months and won’t need another another scan until next December.

This is great news because I've been on six-month scan rotations since finishing chemo in January 2017. Since I'll still be seeing Dr. Maurer for the next few years, he also said that he can more or less act as my GP doctor. That is one less, one less problem I need to worry about, as Ariana Grande puts it.

I will say that this scan was definitely the best of the six I've had since diagnosis. I had little to no scanxiety and just went along my day, business as usual. Usually, my anxiety peaks when I am driving to the office, but today it was a non-issue, though this may have more to do with me being engrossed in Stephen King's The Outsider audiobook. Having to wait only 24 hours for results versus a few days was definitely helpful, as was realizing that this might be the last scan for the next year.

The fact that this all transpired over two snow days didn't hurt either. The only thing that could make it better would be a third day.

Come on, Diego…

Make my day.

Author's Note: About an hour after the original publishing time of this post, I got the call. He came through. Snow day, parte tres. Diego, wherever you are, you are a beautiful, beautiful soul.

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