Three Surgeries and America's "Three Roses"

A number of people reached out to find out what is happening to me now. Here's my update.

March 7, 2021 By Robin McGee

At last, it is 2021.

This January brings new challenges for me…in the form of three surgeries I have this month. I am on a chemo break now until March, in order to accommodate them and their recovery period.

For the first, on the 7th, I must undergo laser eye surgery again. Apparently, in about 20% of cataract surgery cases, the capsule containing the artificial lens films over. Right now, my vision is worse than it has ever been. Fortunately, there is a speedy solution: both eyes will need to have that film punctured to let light into the lens again. My distance eye may need even further correction.

The second, on the 14th, is not technically a surgery—it is an Examination Under Anesthetic or EUA. No one has examined me since my cancer recurred, because of COVID-19 delays. A thorough job of this would be very uncomfortable, so my surgeon wants me conked out for it. On the basis of that exam, he can plan next steps.

The third, on the 28th, is a major open surgery in which my ileostomy is taken down and instead the surgeon fashions me a loop or a double-barrel colostomy. This will afford me a much- improved quality of life, as it will bypass my hopelessly scarred and damaged lower intestine. It will also allow me with treatment options for my stricture, such as dilation or introduction of pain-reducing steroid medication. I will be in hospital for about a week and will need at least 4 weeks recovery.

None of these are cancer surgeries. The doctors deem surgery to remove the malignancy too risky, given the radiation-induced organ fusion and scar tissue from previous surgeries. Although it shrank considerably during chemotherapy it is still there, so I must resume chemo in March. I also hope to return to work in some capacity in March, prior to my scheduled retirement in June. I have just enough sick time banked to cover February's recovery.

Meanwhile, I am enjoying my post-chemo recovery. I am better able to eat (and drink!) now, and my pain has greatly diminished as the tumour receded. My energy is picking up and my skin reactions are slowly resolving. My hair remains closely cropped, and I do not expect it will grow back during my break. I am greatly enjoying seeing more of my son, who has moved back to NS recently. And Andrew is and remains a brick throughout all of it.

I continue with advocacy. Being the very queen of medical error, I was interviewed about it by W5, a national deep-dive news program. It is currently in production but should air this month. Also, I have been active in trying to get government funding for restorative approaches to resolution after healthcare harm. Currently, the Canadian Medical Protective Association receives $540M of your tax dollars each year. This money pays for defense counsel for doctors, primarily for malpractice actions, but also for criminal violations. Not one cent goes to help injured patients or bereaved families, unless they pry it from the CMPA via a lawsuit.

I am the rare person who has won a medical malpractice lawsuit. As described in The Cancer Olympics, the doctors on my diagnostic pathway were disciplined by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia. The College investigation as well as the lawsuit uncovered not just poor judgement in my case, but foundational flaws in basic practice that endangered patients. For example, Dr. One did not take responsibility for tests she herself ordered as a locum. Doctor Two wrote appallingly superficial referral letters which did not even mention she was closing her family practice. Dr. Three did not follow up on a positive cancer screening test. General surgeon Dr. Four had abdicated outpatient surgical triage to her high-school educated receptionist. How long had they practiced that way before being caught? How many people have been jeopardized or harmed by such practice?

But not all people have the stomach or stamina to do a lawsuit or a College complaint. There will always remain a need for medical malpractice litigation for those like me who will lose both life and income. Nevertheless, we need additional alternatives. Several nations (e.g., New Zealand, Sweden) have no-fault restorative systems that emphasize apology and learning from the error, while providing some compensation to those disabled by dangerous medical practice. I and others have been active in promoting a federal petition asking for the government to redirect some of the CMPA's money towards development of more restorative approaches to medical error, which are more humane for patient and doctors. We need only 40 more signatures to bring it before Parliament. Will you stand up for the bereaved and disabled, and for struggling medical staff? Please consider signing it here: https://bit.ly/3jPLXe5

Given my three surgeries, today I chose a song that has "three" in it—"Three Roses" by America, from their 1971 eponymous debut album. I chose it for its reference to winter companionship, which we all long for today. The lyrics speak of a reorientation to life. We each must "stop and feel what I want" as we take stock at the start of a new

year. We must re-invent our jobs, our lifestyles, and even our relationships as the pandemic continues and the vaccines are pending. The song hints at a path forward via contentment and commitment, a warming message in this cold time.

Sitting by the fireside with a book in your hand
Two lazy dogs sittin’ watchin’ your man
Three roses were bought with you in mind
Three roses were bought with you in mind

I gotta stop and see what I’m on about
Stop and feel what I want I gotta
Stop and see what I’m on about
Stop and feel what I want with you

Walking through a wonderland, I got you by the hand
Every move we made, just as if it were planned
Three roses were bought with you in mind
Three roses were bought with you in mind

I gotta stop and see what I’m on about
Stop and feel what I want I gotta
Stop and see what I’m on about
Stop and feel what I want with you

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