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YOUR HEALTH

Can this be happening?

BY GERALD D. SLATTERY JR.
Special to The Wholesaler

Lifting a line from a Randy Newman song — "...I'd like to explain what is happening to me so it doesn't happen to you..." — is as good a way as any to start an article on the intrusion of cancer — prostate cancer specifically — into an otherwise normal life.

Approximately 18 months ago, a routine blood test performed during a regular doctor's visit unveiled some potentially disturbing results in my system. Of the many items that are screened when blood is taken from an individual, one item of particular importance to men and their families that can and should be screened is the Prostate Specific Antigen, hereafter referred to by its more common nom de guerre, PSA. This blood marker is but one of a number of indicators of a man's prostate health.

In my particular instance, a rather pronounced rise in PSA from previous readings was cause for concern. Armed with this information, I visited a local urologist to have my prostate checked for possible irregularities. An internal examination discovered a slightly enlarged prostate, with an abnormality on one side. A biopsy of my prostate and the subsequent analysis of the tissue harvested from my prostate indicated the presence of CANCER, the dreaded "C" word, a life changer!

Further tests and scans ensued to determine the extent of the disease. Bad

- Cancer chages everything
- Lack of discomfort is no indication of health
- You need help
- Prostate cancer has no age requirement

news followed bad news: Not only was my prostate saturated with cancer, it had spread, in my case, to my bones. In a matter of weeks, my life had been turned upside down! This couldn't be happening. I had had no physical discomfort, no frequent urination, no middle of the night bathroom visits. I felt great. How was this possible? All right, I had neglected to have regularly scheduled annual physicals (as recommended by my family physician) with the requisite internal examination so detested and yet so clearly necessary. But I was having my PSA checked every six months and, after all, I had had colonoscopies; shouldn't that have taken care of this as well? A resounding "No" is the answer to that one. These are two very separate and distinct areas of medical investigation that do not intersect, as I have belatedly learned.

Now what? How to proceed? How and to whom do I reach out for help? Questions and more questions: Who will answer them? More importantly, how will they be answered? What lies in store? My mind raced furiously and futilely for answers that were clearly beyond my ability to answer, in itself the most frustrating thing of all. I was out of control and couldn't get myself back into control. And it was with that realization that the answers I was seeking started to arrive.

As a person who always prided himself on problem solving, it became very clear that this particular problem was well beyond my ability to manage and far too big to carry alone. Reach out! "Let the word go forth from this point..." (borrowing from JFK), family, friends, acquaintances — and, for that matter, anyone who would listen — were enlisted in this battle. By the way, it is amazing the number of fellow sufferers that are out there once you reach out. Their understanding, advice and information are proving invaluable in

the Slattery family's search for answers. Based upon these many and varied suggestions, a systematic search ensued for specialists trained in dealing with my particular condition. A number of professional opinions were solicited, compared and analyzed and an informed decision was arrived at with the help of my personal team: wife (What would I do without Adrienne?), immediate family, friends, an understanding employer and my personal family physician, the great Dr. Robert Lawlor.

My/our final treatment decision put me in the hands of the urologic/oncologic team at Memorial Sloan Ketter-

months after my initial diagnosis and 16 months into my treatment, "the reports of my demise" are not only exaggerated but somewhat premature. While I will always have prostate cancer, my doctors, family, friends and acquaintances are helping me manage what is now being referred to as a "chronic" condition. Suffice it to say that we have come a long way in a very short period with, hopefully, a great deal more to be covered. The bothersome thing about all of this is that it could have been avoided or dramatically mitigated with a little more vigilance on my part: to wit, here's the message:

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ing Cancer Hospital in New York City, about a two-hour drive from our home outside of Philadelphia. While we sought and got good advice from the physicians we visited in the greater Philadelphia area, we felt that Sloan would be best for my advancing condition. Also weighing on the decision is the fact that I was born in New York City a "few years" ago (I'm not telling how many, so don't ask!). The thought of reconnecting with my home town, even under these circumstances, was of added comfort. We were also comforted by the "Slattery-specific" treatment regimen (surgery to remove the prostate, radiation of affected bones and a quarterly administration of a medicine) that our team, led by Doctors Howard Scher and Peter Scardino, proposed for my current needs and that forms the basis for future care. These men, their staff and the unique manner of treating me are making a dramatic difference in not only the quality but also the quantity of my life. How very lucky we are to have them working on our behalf.

Given that I was told that failure to be treated for my condition would result in my demise within a year, I am only too pleased to report that, 18

Annual physicals, consisting of an internal examination as well as the chemical analysis of one's blood, together form a powerful deterrent to a thoroughly preventable and treatable form of cancer. By the way, do not believe the old rubric that prostate cancer is found only in older men. Nothing is further from the truth. Like most cancer, prostate cancer knows no age.

And while much is written on the subject of prostate cancer, we found *The Prostate Book* by Peter Scardino M.D. (look for the second edition, recently published) to be of particular value in helping our family understand my condition. Written for laymen, it is a valuable resource for understanding the prostate, its functions and the cancer conditions that can afflict it. Most importantly, it helps promote prostate health. Education and Awareness, Awareness and Education!

For the sake of you and your family, get checked regularly! It is a very inexpensive form of life insurance. ■

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