

“ I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it. — Voltaire ”

GUEST COLUMN

Second opinion critical when facing a life-threatening illness

By CONNIE E. CURRY

In October 2004, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I fought the battle and won, but I continue to be haunted about it returning.

Routine checkups are essential for cancer patients. The pain lies in the mind, waiting for the test results.

A recent bone scan left me eager but nervous to get the results. Two days later I received the call. It appeared my cancer had returned and was in my bones. I dropped to my knees and cried.

“The breast cancer has spread near your spine in the L-3 area,” the doctor said. “It is also in your hip. Without treatment, you probably have 18 months to live. We can put you on a trial chemotherapy that you probably will have to take for the rest of your life. You’ll take 14 chemo pills orally a day, and every three weeks you’ll come in for the trial IV therapy. If it works, we might be able to give you five to 10 years.”

I sat in the office chair and wept.

“If you agree to do the trial chemo, you must sign this form. After signing it, you must start the treatment within five days, or the trial can’t be used,” a nurse told me. “There are strict guidelines. We highly recommend this. The FDA has released this for colon cancer patients and it has given them a few more years. It has not been released for breast cancer so we don’t have studies on its effect yet. You will be our first patient who fits the parameter to use it. There are some possible side effects.”

I was angry and so frightened.

Out of desperation, I signed the form. I would start the chemo in a week. I had to tell my family.

Soon after, my sixth sense kicked in and I started to question this diagnosis. I had many unanswered questions. Having cancer in my L-3 and right hip was too coincidental. I had had many MRIs and a multitude of tests and studies done on my back. Something seemed wrong, but the RN insisted it was cancer and not simply arthritis causing a false reading.

I researched, read and called a friend and fellow breast cancer survivor.

The day I was to start my first chemotherapy, I walked into the doctor’s office skeptical and hesitant. In one hand I carried questions I had written down, and in my other hand was my friend, Margi, whom I knew would support me in whatever decision I made regarding the chemo. Having someone not as connected as family was important to me.

I had already read and learned that a bone scan is not as accurate as a Position Emission Tomography (PET) scan. A radioactive tracer substance is put into the vein for a bone scan. The tracer travels through the body and collects in the bone areas. When the test is read, it looks for hot spots. If the tests results are normal, the radioactive tracer distributes evenly through the body.

If a reading is abnormal, like mine was, hot spots are detected. These hot spots do not automatically mean that those areas are cancer.

Fractures, old and new, can show up. Bone infections, arthritis or even Paget’s disease, which is an abnormal chronic bone disorder, can cause the hot spots.

A PET scan is a powerful imaging technique that measures abnormal molecular cells. It pinpoints diseases in the body. Cancer cells are highly metabolic and the PET scan can detect the cancer from the radioactive glucose (sugar) that is injected into the patient prior to the scan.

PET scanning provides a better, more accurate reading for patients. It gives physicians extra insight; because of my history with arthritis and a bad L-3 disc problem, I requested a PET scan.

I refused chemo and insisted on a PET scan, and Margi and I walked out of the oncologist’s office. I was sent for a PET scan and found out my suspicions were right — I did not have cancer.

For 10 days the emotional turmoil was awful. But I am cancer free and I hope others can learn from my experience.

I encourage anyone to do the following when diagnosed with a serious illness:

1. Have faith in your doctor, and if he doesn’t have time for you, find another one. If he doesn’t ask and know enough about your medical history, he is too busy.

2. Ask others about a doctor’s reputation.

3. If you change doctors, be sure all your records are sent to the new doctor. Be sure he reviews them.

4. Ask for additional tests that might show a different view or diagnosis.

5. If you have mammograms and it says you have a dense reading, insist on an MRI.

6. If you have fibrocystic breast disease and have lumps, insist they be removed or drained. Don’t wait and watch. Waiting is a risk.

7. If you are given a diagnosis and are skeptical, get a second opinion.

8. If you want to be sure it is cancer, request a biopsy. Biopsies are 100 percent accurate. PET scans are 95 percent accurate. Many times bone scans have false readings.

9. If you have one form of cancer and a new one is found later, don’t let a doctor assume it is the same kind of cancer that has resurfaced. (I had breast cancer and I was told breast cancer had spread to my bones.) Without a study (tracer done) to confirm what kind of cancer it is, they are assuming. If the proper cancer is not detected, the proper chemo may possibly not be given. You need the most effective chemotherapy.

10. Don’t be intimidated by a doctor. Ask many questions.

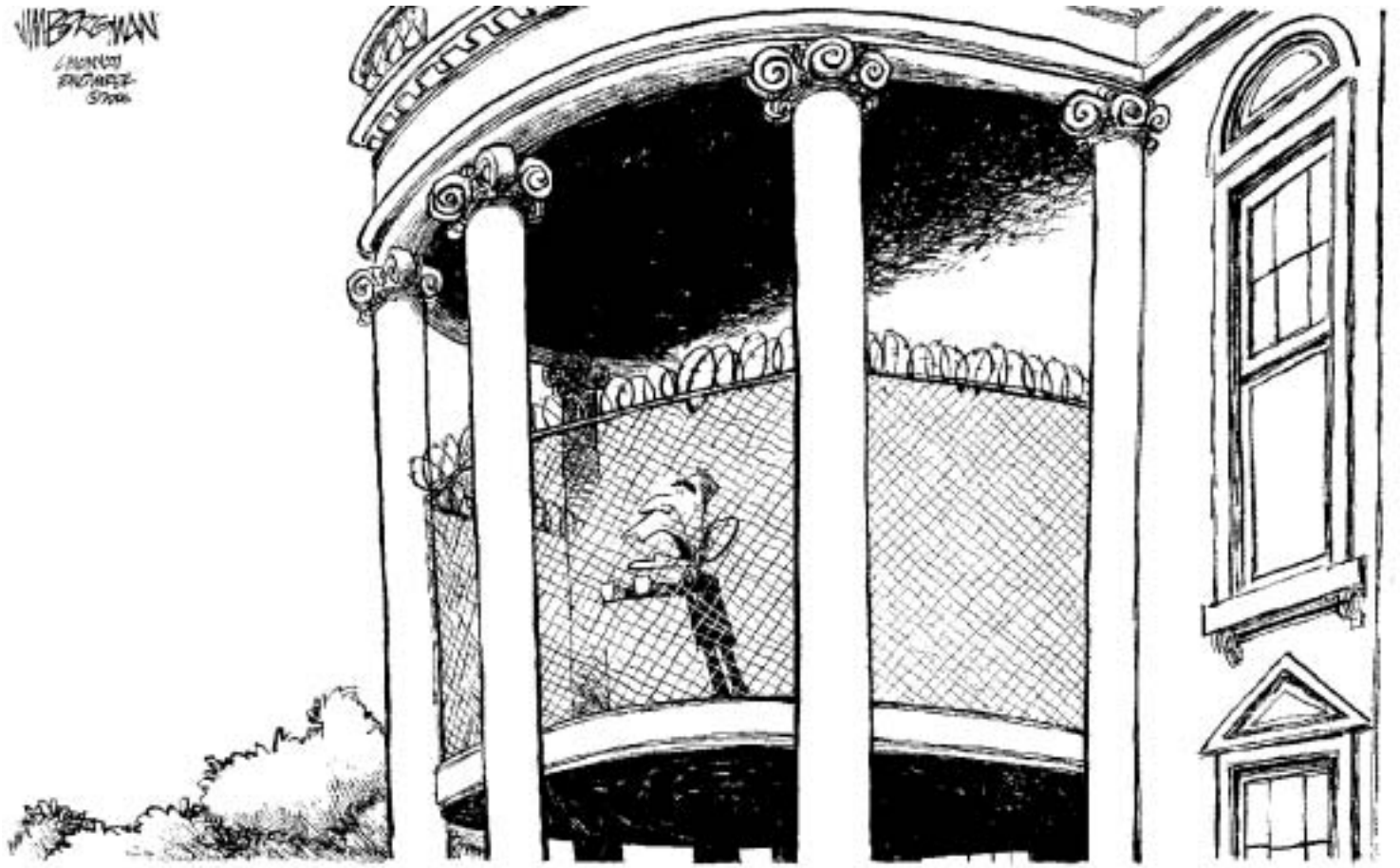
11. Studies show that trial chemotherapy has helped and saved lives. But don’t be pressured to take it.

12. Never give up. Many doctors have different views and treatments for the same illness or disease. Educate yourself and know what is right for you.

13. Don’t ever ignore your sixth sense. No one knows your body like you do.

14. Have faith and never give up hope.

Connie E. Curry is a freelance writer and Gazette contributor.



Are we disposed to fight a religious war?

President Bush is a victim of his idealistic certitudes. These have their place. It is hard to imagine how Great Britain would have survived the year 1942 without Churchill’s apocalyptic reassurances, never mind that when they were spoken, they must have been the cause of laughter in the Nazi high command, which brought them in via radio antennas sitting on top of the Eiffel Tower. The problem has been that without Bush’s high calls for global political reform, the American public would have gone along only reluctantly with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. And enthusiasm for these wars is now flagging because we have assured ourselves that we aren’t there to choke off nuclear arms development. We are there to save the locals from the kind of government they would have if left to their own resources.



William Buckley
Universal Press

We are struggling hard, but not hard enough, to reanimate our far-flung missions abroad. The distortions are by no means exclusively the result of Republican shortsightedness. We are acting out, in Iraq and Afghanistan, ideologies that trace back to the universalization of the American creed. We pronounced, in the Declaration of Independence, ideals we conceived of as universally appealing, but which no one had the least intention of exporting beyond the boundaries of the newly independent country.

All of that came much later, becoming full-blown U.S. policy only in the reign of Woodrow Wilson, whose espousal of ideological diplomacy caused desperate problems for himself, his administration and the League of Nations. Missions for world reform came back in the late ’30s, provoked by the universalist aims of Soviet communism and, though more finite in its appetites, the far reaches of the Nazis’ Third Reich. The rhetoric of the Four Freedoms and of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was there to justify international activity on the part of the United States: the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the hundred meetings of native idealists who reasoned, with great appeal, that the liberties we would not ourselves do without were written in a universal idiom, leaving us as chief agents of evangelism.

More has happened than merely the difficulties we are having in Iraq and the reappearance of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Critics of our failed policies there can come up with plausible

excuses. There is the factor of a lack of manpower, and of the dissipation of unified activity because of local separatisms. No one can doubt that the divisions among Kurds and Shia and Sunnis are responsible for much that is awry, and Peter Galbraith’s proposal that Iraq be divided immediately into three sovereign political entities is attractive. But what has not happened is any deep growth of democratic roots, let alone branches and leaves — bills of rights, judicial procedures, the division of power — that one associates with organically secure liberal societies.

And it is worse even than that. The faith of Islam is in fighting trim. In millions, the Islamists are traveling and settling abroad. From these reserves we get occasional irruptions of high-tech loathing, in lower Manhattan and Washington, D.C., in Spanish trains, in British subways. The elderly voices of Islam that stressed toleration and cohabitation are so quiet they might as well be silent. Columnist Pat Buchanan gives us a prickly rundown: “Islamists are taking over in Somalia. They are in power in Sudan. The Muslim Brotherhood won 60 percent of the races it contested in Egypt. Hezbollah swept the board in southern Lebanon. Hamas seized power from Fatah in the West Bank and Gaza. The Shia parties who hearken to Ayatollah Sistani brushed aside our favorites, Chalabi and Iyad Allawi, in the Iraqi elections. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is the most admired Iranian leader since Khomeini. In Afghanistan, the Taliban is staging a comeback.”

All the world is waiting to see what is going to happen in Egypt after three decades of the most expensive U.S. patronage in history (matched only by our patronage of Israel). And what of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan and Indonesia? Not many are predicting that the future there will be pacific and liberal.

Two challenges are posed. The first is relatively manageable: Lower the flag on American universalism — not to half-mast, but not as toplofty as it has been flying since the end of the Second World War. The second is tougher. Why is Islam burning bright? What on earth do they have that we don’t get from Christ our King? If what they want is a religious war, are we disposed to fight it?

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