

# Coping with Cancer – A Doctor as Patient (Part 2) By Dr Richard Yung



We cannot dictate to doctors, any more than to God. Unless we learn to be patient, our anxiety may actually delay our recovery. Being patient is not just a matter of being resigned, or putting up with the inevitable. It is something we need to practise if we are to cope with being ill.

In Part 1, Dr Yung described how his multiple myeloma was diagnosed, his initial reaction and how through faith in God he achieved a peace of mind to commence therapy. In Part 2, Dr Yung continues:

#### SOURCES OF STRENGTH

One of our church members had struggled for years with Hanson's Disease and eventually underwent an amputation. A few years later, breast cancer hit her, and she had to have surgery and chemotherapy. Throughout her ordeals, her faith did not waver. Her courage and optimistic attitude were a shining example to us all.

I have seen quite a number of doctor colleagues' morale shattered after they were diagnosed with some form of malignancy. But when this surgeon friend of mine developed lymphoma, he took his chemotherapy like a soldier and carried on working - sometimes even on the same day after a treatment session. His tough-mindedness was like a torch in front of me. He visited me on several occasions and supported me like a true friend.

In the Haematology Day Care Room, I met a lady patient who was hairless after her transplant. My wife and I called her "The Nun". She came into the room with two big Sugi buns for follow-up treatment, smiling at everyone. After a bout of vomiting, she would eat her buns. When we marvelled at her feat, she just laughed, "Don't worry, just eat and eat after your vomiting!" She didn't seem underweight while I had already lost 15 kg! Her smiles and spirit gave us all that extra boost that was so important to sustain us through the discomforts of treatment. She was like a One-Person Support Group. Sadly, two weeks ago, she succumbed to a recurrence. But her smile lives on.

Once, in the ward before my admission, there was a 68-year-old woman with leukaemia, who had completed PSCT successfully. She never complained, did everything she was told, and ate everything she was given without even a murmur. This is stoicism at its best.

With stories like these, how could I, a professional, show any sign of weakness, and feel sorry for myself?

But I had another source of strength. My wife and I pray for divine assistance everyday, trusting in the goodness of God's plan. We are very thankful that I did not have to face more suffering than I could take.

#### THE X FACTOR

I marvel at the advances of medical science. But I have come to appreciate even more that "X Factor" of an individual's response to treatments, his mental attitude and will to live. We may be the best of surgeons, but we have no control over the healing power of the patient. Non-believers call this "nature", we Christians believe it is God who controls the process.

When we are healthy we tend to take our immune system for granted – until our health is compromised and even a small bruise takes a long time to heal.

Books on alternative medicine talk about enhancing the immune system. Besides antioxidants, minerals, herbs and other foods, they mention intangible factors such as exercises, stress reductions, beliefs and attitudes, relationships and support groups. These seem to be good adjuncts to the mainstream medical treatments.

#### SENSE OF CONTROL

Last year I received through e-mail an article by a medical doctor entitled, "Surviving the Terror of Survival", published in the Annals of Internal Medicine in April

that year. The doctor described his treatment and its aftermath. "On reflection I am struck by my inability to share my terror. Perhaps admitting my terror would have made it impossible for me as a physician to retain my belief in the science of the procedure. During the radiation therapy, I just wanted to lie in bed and disappear...."

He went on to talk about his discharge from the hospital – "Once home, I did not talk to anyone about my experience in the hospital. When I tried to talk about it, I cried. I was totally surprised at my own reaction. My wife and I set up an appointment with a psychiatric social worker. The first meeting was difficult; I cried more than I talked. But that night, I had the first decent sleep since coming home."

"What I remember now, months later, was my sense of extreme helplessness, and my inability to muster strength to fight it. Everything was out of my hands. I just had to wait, and hope. As a doctor, I had always taken pride in caring for others, and I was the one in-charge. My time in hospital disrupted that sense of control so completely that even now, more than a year later, some emotional fragility remains."

Our medical training has never adequately prepared us as patients. Emotional support, spousal and family support, social and spiritual support all matter to us, besides proper medical attention. I have been very fortunate to have all these.

I have a strong team of experienced and professional doctors. But it is their caring and compassionate attitude towards all patients that has impressed me. They have an equally committed and well-trained group of nurses and ancillary staff to help them. The cheerful atmosphere of the Haematology Centre beats that of any private hospital, bringing smiles to many a sour-faced patient.

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#### SUPPORT FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS

My wife was with me everyday, sharing my suffering and trying her best to make me comfortable. Our sons and their families provided the next level of support. My brother and sister, and several other relatives, all living overseas, visited me as a group, boosting my morale. In between treatments when I got home, my grandchildren would come along to play near me. It gave me a warm feeling as I watched them and thought to myself, "How wonderful is this continuity of life!"

Outside the home, my partners and our clinic staff not only showed their personal concern but also gave me a sense of security by ensuring my practice was being carried on without disruption. Many of my old and faithful patients prayed and sent me encouraging e-mails and cards. My church's fellowship groups also prayed ceaselessly for my well-being.

My many relatives and friends, showed their concern with visits and phone calls, sending cards and letters, my favourite food – to fatten me – books and other reading materials to keep up my morale.

Many provided me with information for herbal and other alternative treatments. One, a specialist anaesthetist, called me about an old Canadian Indian herbal cancer remedy preparation called Essiac, and told me he was convinced of its efficacy. He went to the National Library to borrow a report on this product, and even bought me a bottle from a health shop opposite Novena to try. I was very touched. But I must confess, with my scientific training, I have found it difficult to try alternative medicine.

With all the solid support, I consider myself very fortunate to have weathered these difficult days.

#### A POSITIVE ATTITUDE

People have often commented on my positive attitude. It has made me reflect a little about how each patient has to come to terms with his own problems. It may be hard for us to accept limitations and restrictions. But if we are positive in our outlook and allow ourselves to be supported in all aspects of our lives besides the medical treatments, we can better face our predicaments.

Attitude is the way we think. It is also something other people can actually see. They can hear it in our voice, see it in the way we move, and feel it when they are with us. If we have a positive attitude, we look for ways to solve the problems we can solve, and we let go of the things we have no control over.

How can we develop this positive attitude - especially when we are facing a health crisis? We can try by emphasising the good i.e. looking on the bright side of things and always hoping for the best. After all, life is about choices. We can choose to accept half a glass as half-full or half-empty. In addition, we can train ourselves to be tough-minded in our efforts to endure our predicaments and refuse to accept defeat without a fight.

#### THE BEAUTY OF LIFE

We can learn to laugh more: to laugh at ourselves, and to see the funny side of things. Endorphins are supposed to increase when we are happy and laughing. I do try to see the funny side of things, except when suffering from my treatment's side effects. Those were not funny times. Optimistic people are said to be happier than those with a negative outlook on life. It is not that positive people will not die - but I suppose they just die happier!

In life we take so much for granted - health, food, work, family, friends. It comes as a shock when one of these is taken away. Being ill often helps us to appreciate the little things. As we do so, we begin to see everything in a new light. Have you ever woken up in the morning to face a beautiful day, with the sunlight streaming in, birds chirping, and say to yourself, "Thank God for this new day, and thank God I am still here!"

An Asian-American professor of English at Wisconsin who presented an excellent paper at the Yale History conference I attended, e-mailed me before she died from breast cancer with widespread metastases. I remember her as the lady who wore an elegant black hat and though slightly frail-looking, spoke with a strong voice. I really admired her courage for coming to the conference in the midst of her treatments.

She wrote in her e-mail, "It is paradoxical that the more one makes one's peace with the realisation of one's own mortality and

the imminence of death, the more one appreciates the preciousness and beauty of life in all its dailyness..."

By choosing to be positive in outlook, we may become more aware of all the 'pluses' in life and not just the things we don't have and all that is wrong with us. Remember things could have been much worse!

#### REFLECTING AND TRUSTING

When we are ill, we reflect, meditate and think about some really basic questions about human life. What is the purpose of life, the meaning and purpose in marriage, family, work and hobbies? Will these things see us through the crises of life? What about death? What happens after that?

We cannot heal ourselves alone. We must learn to trust other people - doctors, nurses and other care-givers. My surgeon friend with lymphoma believes the trust we place in our care-givers remains an essential component in our recovery. We do need their help.

But doctors are people too - with their own worries and pressures on their time. As patients, we must not expect the world to revolve around us. Medical science has made amazing advances, but doctors cannot always work miracles. Trust is important. We cannot dictate to doctors, any more than to God. Unless we learn to be patient, our anxiety may actually delay our recovery. Being patient is not just a matter of being resigned, or putting up with the inevitable. It is something we need to practise if we are to cope with being ill.

Thank you for listening to my story. What next then? Not long ago, some two years after I have started treatment, my doctor said to me in jest, "I still owe you three years!" I suppose it will have to be one step at a time for me. Meanwhile, I do look forward positively to a good quality of life in whatever time remaining. ■

#### *Editor's Note:*

*This article is based on a talk given by Col. (Retd) Dr. Richard HYung at the NUH Oncology Grand Round on January 16th, 2001. The SMA News thanks Professor John Wong who heads the NHG Cancer Programme for encouraging the publication of this article.*

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