

Just when you think you have heard every story about prostate cancer, the one about me, Denis Farbstein, will have you shaking your head.

It was August of 2001.

My G.P. would begin his usual annual physical conversation with the same “How’s your golf game this year” and “Are you ready to go back to school?” Halfway through my examination I asked my doctor if I should have a P.S.A. test. My doctor thought that since I was 47, it wouldn’t be a bad idea but he was convinced that it would turn out negative since my Digital Rectal Examination (D.R.E.) seemed normal. A week later, I received a phone call from my doctor that would change the rest of my life. He was making me an appointment A.S.A.P. to see a urologist at the North York General Hospital. The realization that I could have cancer certainly had my attention. I knew very little about what P.S.A. stood for but a score of 11 was not good. I had my first biopsy a month later. I was relieved that my biopsy showed negative for cancer.

It was now March 2003, eighteen months later, and having three more P.S.A. tests, I was asked to have biopsy #2. My P.S.A. had doubled to 22. A day after the biopsy I was admitted to North York General Hospital with a polysyllabic word for an Ecoli type of infection. I was on 2 intravenous antibiotics and I was wearing a mask as SARS had hit the Toronto scene. I survived

and fortunately, biopsy #2 showed negative for cancer. It was an eerie feeling that the biopsy almost killed me!!

It was now June 2006, three years later, and I had had 6 more P.S.A. tests. Time for another biopsy, or so I thought. My score rose to 41. This time my urologist took another approach. I was to have a Cystoscopy. You guessed it, no abnormalities in my prostate gland. Everything seemed fine. I was told that I must be one of those high P.S.A. producers.

We fast-forward another 18 months. It was now Sept. 2007, and my P.S.A. had risen to 55. Why couldn't my stocks take the same ascending trend! My urologist wanted me to wait another 6 months. I took a bold step and asked, "How about 4 months". For the first time I thought the inevitable was to come, the big "C" word. We had a family trip planned for South America in December. I wanted to enjoy the trip of a lifetime while we were all still healthy. Foreshadowing isn't necessarily a good thing!

It was now January 2008. In just 4 months, my P.S.A. rose another 11 points to 66. It was time for biopsy #3. My suspicions were realized. The biopsy revealed cancer in 2 out of 10 needle samples. In the following 2 weeks, I was to have a bone scan and a CT scan to determine if my cancer had spread outside the prostate. I found out after the fact that I was allergic to the dye (Contrast) in the CT scan and that I developed a drug rash. It was cleared with a cortisone cream but the next day I looked like

I had a golf ball in my throat. Now I'm thinking not thyroid cancer, too. Your head starts to play funny tricks when you are stressed. An ultrasound confirmed that my thyroid blew up as a reaction to the dye.

It was now February 19th, 2008. Before our appointment with both my urologist and a radiation oncologist from Sunnybrook Hospital to discuss my options, my wife and I were introduced to a volunteer from Man2Man, Gerry Garshon. He gave us a plethora of current information on Prostate Cancer and informed us that there was a Support Group meeting in about 2 hours located just behind the building we were in. We then had an hour meeting with the two specialists. All I could focus on was Stage 1C cancer, Gleason score 7 (aggressive). The Bone Scan was clear of cancer but the CT scan of my abdomen and pelvic area showed 4 spots on my liver. Maybe I have liver cancer, as well. To précis our conversation, we thought best to get 2 more opinions.

I decided to go to the Man2Man meeting to at least alleviate some fears and ask questions that I thought these men could answer. I got up, and being the thirty-one-year veteran teacher, hoped that my voice wouldn't quiver and I could disguise my nervousness. I told them what I had just learned. They asked me many questions but two statements came through loud and clear. Only I could make the choice that was right for me and no one at the meeting was going to judge me whatever my decision

might be. That was the most difficult part. I wanted to make the right choice but what was the right choice; radiation and hormone therapy, or prostatectomy, radiation and hormone therapy? After the meeting, I returned home to reiterate to my wife how relieved I was not feeling like I was on an island unto myself. My wife noticed a more relaxed demeanour in such a short time. I told her that I met some very special, knowledgeable men. After many discussions with my wife, we decided to go with the radical prostatectomy first and take a look and see attitude.

In the next 2 weeks I managed to attain 2 appointments with surgeons: 1 at Sunnybrook Hospital and 1 at Princess Margaret Hospital. Both doctors agreed that given my age, health, P.S.A. level and Gleason score aggression, that a radical prostatectomy was the only way to go. My wife jotted down pages of notes and we had many questions to be answered. In the next week, we selected Dr. Robert Nam, as our urological oncologist from Sunnybrook Hospital. Dr. Nam's candid honesty made me woozy and I had to lie down, but my wife and I thought he was a most knowledgeable doctor as well as a highly skilled surgeon. Dr. Nam ordered an ultrasound for my liver to make sure the four spots were not cancerous. Whew, I dodged another bullet. I can live with cysts and haemangioma. At both hospitals, I met Man2Man volunteers. It was like they were shadowing me.

April 9th 2008 was a significant day to remember. At 11:30, I was rolled into the operating room. Dr. Nam said, “Are you ready to rumble?” I replied, “Let’s do it”. Maybe it was the confidence I had with Dr. Nam’s surgical skills, or maybe the anxiety of waiting for this day had arrived. Whatever it was, I was at peace and as strange as it may seem, I was very relaxed and positive. The anaesthetist then put a mask over my nose and told me to take a deep breath. Four hours whizzed by and when I came to, Dr. Nam, although, dressed to go home, made a point of coming into the recovery room and telling me that the cancer was not as bad as he thought. He scraped around the margins, and the lymph nodes looked good.

At that point I felt as though a huge weight was lifted from my groin even though it was only the size and shape of a walnut!! Within twenty-four hours, I walked with my dancing partner, my I.V. pole, equipped with my self-medicated P.C.A. (morphine) button, my blood drip tube and catheter bag sporting the latest in hospital gown attire. Four Man2Man Volunteers visited me and they were very vigilant to make sure I was out of bed and walking rectangles on the C2 ward.

Soon, my three-day sentence had passed. I was homeward bound with 23 staples under my navel, a catheter strapped to my leg, and a pillow under my butt to cushion all of the potholes on Bayview Avenue.

My G.P. took the staples out the following week and 5 days after that, my catheter came out. Dr. Nam also gave me the good news from the pathology biopsy report that the cancer was encapsulated and the lymph nodes were free of cancer. With a joyous sigh, I asked, “What now”? Dr. Nam said that he wanted to do a P.S.A. test in three months time, and hopefully on July 17th, if my P.S.A. is close to zero then I would escape radiation and hormone therapy.

I wish this was a dream and that my imagination got the best of me. The reality is that I have incredible support from my family, friends, colleagues, Man2Man support group, and a positive philosophy that doesn't allow me to worry about the things I cannot control and act on the things I can.

One more thing to remember: If you are celebrating Passover it is not a good idea to have a Radical Prostatectomy. The reason is that the combination of Tylenol 3 and matzo is a sure prescription for Prune juice and Milk of Magnesia!!

Thank you for listening.