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Dr. Daughter: When Knowledge Hurts: Being a Physician and a Family Member

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Doctor View:

A 62-year-old white male with a history of head and neck carcinoma diagnosed July 2013 is s/p chemo/radiation therapy ending in Nov. 2013. A biopsy was positive for Squamous Cell Carcinoma, P16 positive with bilateral lymph node involvement. The patient had significant fibrotic reaction to radiation therapy resulting in esophageal stricture rendering him unable to eat. After multiple esophageal dilations, PEG tube was removed Feb 2015.

The Patient presents complaining of abdominal pain and nausea for 3-4 weeks and reports PCP told him he appeared to be jaundiced. The patient had an abdominal ultrasound to assess for gallbladder disease. No obstruction was seen but gallbladder was dilated so follow up CT abdomen was performed. CT scan showed multiple liver lesions, periportal lesions, and dilated bile duct...

Daughter View:

My father is the BEST dad a girl could ask for. As a single parent, he was Mr. Mom while being CEO of an electric company and an SEC football official. Being the BEST dad was his top priority, and he succeeded. We are about as close as any daddy-daughter could be and chat daily on my way home from work.

I was devastated when he was diagnosed with head and neck cancer two years ago. Radiation and Chemotherapy erased any detectable sign of the cancer but left him unable to swallow for nearly a year. Just as he started to eat again, he mentioned some uneasiness in his stomach and occasional nausea. I told him it was GERD and recommended a PPI. The nausea persisted so I thought it could be a gallbladder issue. My dad made an appointment with his PCP.

It was April 20, 2015, and I was completing a 28 hour MICU shift, I get a text from my dad saying “Call me ASAP. It’s important.” I had already ignored several of his calls, so I broke rounds to call. He answered and I said, “Make it quick dad, I’m still rounding.” He made it quick, “Well, my CT scan came back showing that I have lots of spots in my liver and my gallbladder is dilated. They said I should go to the hospital. What should I do? What could it be? Is it my cancer?”

Doctor View:

Sleep deprived I thought, “Spots in your liver” likely metastases of a different primary cancer unrelated to his head and neck cancer. Within a split second differentials came to mind: 1) Colon Cancer with metastasis to the liver. He missed his 2nd colonoscopy a year ago. 2) Pancreatic Cancer, please no!

Daughter View:

I kept calm on the phone and told my dad to go by the imaging center, have them fax over a copy of the CT report and start driving this way while I figure out what to do. When I got off the phone, I broke down and started to cry in the middle of the MICU. My attending told me to go home and get some rest. I couldn’t rest! I have to figure out what is going on with my dad. As soon as I got the faxed report, I ran it over to his oncologist and asked him what he thought. He said let’s admit him and sort this out.

My dad arrived with a copy of the CT scan. I immediately took the scan to radiology. As soon as we got to the pancreas, I could see it… a large mass in the head of the pancreas. The resident, an old friend of mine, noticed the name on the scan and immediately said I’m so sorry. We both knew what it was without saying anything: my worst fear, pancreatic cancer.

I asked my dad and step-mom if they wanted to know what I thought it was, and they said yes. I told one of the people I love most that I thought he was dying. I do this regularly in my profession but no amount of training could prepare me for this.

Doctor View:

The liver biopsy came back positive for squamous cell suggestive of metastatic head and neck cancer. Since this didn’t explain the pancreatic mass, we biopsied the pancreas that also matched his head and neck cancer. This was a better diagnosis than originally thought.

Daughter View:

After a few rounds of failed chemo and desperate searches for clinical trials, my dad went home with hospice four months later. Telling my dad, he was dying and surrendering to the fact that there was nothing else I or the medical community could do was the hardest thing I have ever done. As a physician, I help people every day but couldn’t do anything to help my own father other than love and support him until the very end.

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