

The Silent but Deadly Killer

By: Mattie Whitworth

How would you feel if your days were numbered? Pancreatic cancer is known as the “silent killer.” Most pancreatic cancers display few symptoms in early stages, and, by the time people start seeing them, they’re almost always deadly. Pancreatic cancer is one of the five deadliest cancers, killing an estimated 47,000 people in 2020 so far, according to the National Cancer Institute. Very few people are diagnosed with the cancer before it’s too late, and my dad was one of those few. Although he’s still battling against the lasting effects of the cancer, my family is trying to make the best of the situation as he continues to fight it.

My dad was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in late November of 2019. In early December, my parents shared the devastating news with the rest of our family. My dad said that telling the rest of my family was the “hardest thing I’ve ever done,” and watching him tell everyone was one of the worst experiences of my life. Living with the knowledge of the cancer for the first weeks was the hardest, but, gradually, reality set in, and I understood that he had a better chance than most. After we learned more about what had taken root inside my dad, I think my family started to consider it a miracle from God that the doctors caught it when they did. My dad had been experiencing a growing discomfort in his gallbladder area for a couple months before. This led to tests upon tests and anxiously awaiting results until the conclusion came that it was, in fact, a cancerous tumor. If he hadn’t felt that discomfort when and where he did, the cancer would have inevitably spread, and what could have happened would’ve been disastrous.

The long road to healing began in January of 2020. He was told to do six chemotherapy treatments, he’d be evaluated, and, if able, the doctor would do the Whipple surgery—a procedure that removes the tumor—then two more treatments afterward. Chemotherapy makes it

hard for most patients to eat and sleep, and those were the hardest things for my dad. He describes it as, “hard to get the food down,” and as if he was tired but couldn’t fall asleep. With each treatment, the side effects got worse. These issues still dominate him today. Day by day, the toll on him gets more and more prominent as hours of sleep slip away, and his weight continues to diminish.

Mid-February—during the middle of his treatments—the threat of Covid-19 started to emerge. It had an impact on everything my family did. The fear of contracting this virus slowly spread throughout the hearts and homes of the United States and, especially, into mine. Covid-19, also known as SARS-CoV-2, is a disease that works against your respiratory system and works to destroy immune systems—especially weak ones. Chemotherapy considerably weakens the body and immune system, and, if my dad contracted this virus, the results could be deadlier than the cancer.

In April and May, Covid-19 began to spike and rapidly spread. The hospitals began to do non-elective surgeries only, and all others were postponed. My dad finished his sixth chemotherapy treatment around the end of March. After he had a scan done to see if the tumor shrank, my family learned it hadn’t changed. The doctor decided to do two more treatments before the surgery. Although the Whipple procedure wasn’t an elective surgery, it wasn’t mandatory at that time. This news was one of the most devastating of all. We thought he was done and would get a break from the treatments and the exhaustion they caused, only to find out he had to suffer through two more before an equally taxing surgery.

On May 12th, the surgery finally took place. This was at one of the peaks of Covid-19, and my family was more fearful than ever of contracting the virus. Due to the virus, my dad had to take numerous safety measures such as a Covid-19 test before the surgery, and, during the period

between the test and the surgery, we couldn't go anywhere. The day before the surgery, I was filled with anxiety that the surgery could go wrong. The doctor had told us that if the cancer had spread anywhere, he'd have to stop the surgery. The next day, after the surgery had started, I waited restlessly for results of the surgery to find out it was a success, and everything went as well as possible. In the following months, during the recovery process and still to this day, my family must be especially cautious of Covid-19.

Pancreatic cancer has brought on more complications than my family could ever have imagined. Ranging from pre-diabetes to problems with the bilirubin in my dad's liver, he has been to Hell and back. By August, my dad was feeling better and looking healthier, and, when the second round of radiation and chemotherapy started, it spiraled downward and hasn't come back up. He did twenty-eight days of chemotherapy through pills and radiation. He started off strong, but, by the end, his sleeping was more erratic, and eating had become extremely difficult for him. His weight had dropped by tens of pounds, and it was getting harder for him to much. Even after the twenty-eight days of radiation, it hadn't gotten much better for him. My cross-country season had started around that time, but, still, he *always* gathered the energy to come to my cross-country meets. Whether he was feeling good or bad, he made the long car rides to the meets to support me. Even now, he does his best to take me to school and to practice sometimes; although, these occasions are becoming less frequent.

Every day is a struggle for my dad. Eating is a struggle, sleeping is a struggle, and putting on weight is a struggle. His bilirubin levels as of late November remained problematic, and this dilemma still had not been fixed. Hospital visits and out-patient surgeries feel routine at this point. On November 20th, my mom picked me up from school saying that my dad was in the hospital for a blood clot and something in his lungs—suspected either pneumonia or Covid-19.

Thankfully, the Covid test returned negative, and it didn't happen to be either. It was one less problem in this abhorrent world. Even now, he's still fighting the effects of the cancer, radiation, and surgery. We're getting through it, procedure by procedure and day by day.

Life with my dad's pancreatic cancer isn't easy. I've missed cross-country practices and haven't been able to do as many things with friends because of Covid-19. It's affected my mom in various ways; she has had to double all the tasks she normally had to do with all the driving, errands, and everything else around the house. My family has been doing this since January, and, with the climbing Covid cases and my dad's almost stationary—if not worsening—condition, this situation is getting worse and worse for my family. The fear of contracting Covid-19 is a defining part in my family's lives now, and I do everything carefully to avoid getting the virus. This entire experience has shown us not to take life for granted and realize the small things matter.

And although this experience has been filled with negative emotions, it helped me choose what profession to pursue after college. I have always known I wanted to go into the medical field, but my father's situation pushed me towards oncology. I realized that I don't want any family to ever go through what we have. But, if they have to go through it, I want to make sure they know they're not alone. I will be able to relate to patients and help them and their families through the troubling times with these deadly diseases. When I'm older, I will make this world a better place for people like my dad and families like my own.

I want to share my dad's story to let other people who have close family members with cancer or who have cancer to know they're not alone, and it *will* get better. To all the cancer survivors out there—you can do anything. To all those with cancer—keep fighting and never

lose hope. Finally, to all those who have passed because of it—fly high, and thank you for fighting the good fight.

Works Cited:

“Cancer of the Pancreas - Cancer Stat Facts.” *SEER*, National Cancer Institute, seer.cancer.gov/statfacts/html/pancreas.html.