

An article based on Richard's story first appeared in the Hooksett Banner on February 12, 2009

My name is Richard Bloom. Most people, when they hit the age of 50, are on their way to putting things together for their retirement years. I am an 8-year survivor of Pancreatic Cancer. The cycle is continuous. It has no real beginning or end. Every day I wake up, reprisal sets in motion once again. It goes beyond the 18 different medications I must take daily and the chronic pain I must suffer through. It involves a rigorous fight to defy the odds and perhaps become an anomaly in the medical world: to become the first person to survive long term from pancreatic cancer.

My life revolves around my medication schedule, food, diabetes and other medical side effects from the 8 hour long surgery I underwent to stop the cancer from spreading. Most of my friends and family abandoned me when I started to become sick with major abdominal pains which lead to the diagnosis of pancreatic cancer.

It wasn't always like this. In fact it's a dramatic change from the robust and upbeat life I used to lead. As a high caliber car and truck salesman for 16 years, I often enjoyed riding my Harley Davidson and enjoyed going on extreme fishing trips. The hobbies in which I was immersed are now a thing of the past, as the world as I knew it was shattered by the news I received from my medical Doctor in the summer of 1996.

It began when I started missing a few days of work, due to being tired and fatigued. After several visits with my Primary Care Doctor and numerous blood tests it was discovered that I had Viral Hepatitis C, which completely caught me off guard. I was one of the first people back in 1996 to be tested for Hepatitis C. The Doctors were able to trace the origins of Hepatitis C back to a blood transfusion I received when I was 16 years old. I was relieved in one sense that the diagnosis confirmed the excessive fatigue I was experiencing. All I wanted to do was to destroy the virus so I could return to work.

I started undergoing a treatment, which required three interferon shots per week – Monday, Wednesday and Friday. The side effects from the injections were sweating, muscle aches, fevers and vomiting that could last up to 18 hours. After three months a follow-up blood test was performed and the Hepatitis C virus tested negative, but treatment continued for a total of 48 weeks. After stopping injections I found out there was permanent damage to the neuromuscular system. I would no longer be able to go back to work so I had no choice but to file for SSDI in July of 1998.

For the next three years things remained as they were and I had adjusted to my new lifestyle. But in June of 2001, another major life-altering event happened. I suffered an acute ischemic stroke to the right side my brain. It was caused by a blocked artery in the front upper lobe of the brain. There was a hard road ahead of me – I needed now to regain the use of the left side of my body as I was partially paralyzed from the stroke.

I had to sell my home because I was unable to keep up with mowing the lawn and other projects as my home sat on a five acres of land. I downsized to a town house to lower the cost of living and where the association takes care of most the outdoor maintenance. For the next year I was undergoing rehabilitation so that my body could regain the use of my left arm and leg as well as the left side of my face. Most of the Doctors thought that there was little chance to regain what was lost through the stroke. Within a year from the stroke I made a 95% recovery and thanked God for his mercy on me.

I wish I could say this was the end of things to come. A year had passed after having the stroke and now I was feeling chest pains. After going to two different local Hospitals in Manchester, NH , I was eventually rushed to Mass General Hospital in Boston where they discovered a 3/4” tear i n the atrium – the part of the heart that separates the right and left chambers. I was immediately taken into the operating room for three hours of surgery. At that time my now ex-girlfriend came down to Boston and stayed at the Holiday Inn Hotel which is owned by Mass General Hospital. I had to make a deal with my cardiologist to be discharged as soon as possible because I had two tickets to see the Rolling Stones in concert at Gillette Stadium. I'm probably the only person to watch a Rolling Stones concert live in less than 24 hours after having life saving heart surgery.

The next two years were filled with joy. I was back on the slopes skiing, took two trips down to Florida and started thinking about possibly going back to work. That vision changed when I started experiencing sharp abdominal pains. The first time I went into a Manchester emergency room they treated it as a pulled muscle as I had been working out in a gym 4-5 days a week to stay in shape. No one took any blood work, but wrote a prescription for some anti inflammatory and muscle relaxant medications which did nothing for the problem. About a week later I was back in the ER and this time they took some blood work and ran a CT scan. It turned out to be that my blood work was 10 times the normal limits for pancreatic enzymes which help digest food. The CT scan showed a very inflamed pancreas which meant that I needed to be admitted as an inpatient. I was given some pain medicine through an IV as the pain was extremely intense. They diagnosed it as pancreatitis.

After the inflammation subsided and the blood levels were back to the normal range I was discharged and followed up with my primary care doctor.

Unfortunately this was not the only attack – less than two weeks later I was back in the ER and had to receive IV pain meds and was admitted. This seemed to repeat itself over and over again, I told the doctors that I felt there was more to this than pancreatitis. They actually accused me of abusing the ER just to get narcotics injected through an IV. I wished they had been right.

The Elliot Hospital had me transported to Dartmouth Hospital in Lebanon, NH which had better imaging equipment. They saw what looked like a cyst on the pancreas. I signed a consent form to allow a biopsy of what they called a cyst. When they did the biopsy and pulled the cover off the cyst and collected the cyst fluid they saw a cluster of tumors on the head of the pancreas. They took some samples of the tumors as well to be analyzed. I guess if you have a cluster of islet cell tumors dug into the nerves inside your pancreas causing extreme pain spasms there is no question about having abused the Elliott Hospital's ER Room.

About two weeks after I was discharged from the Dartmouth Hospital I was scheduled to see an oncology surgeon for a Pancreatic Cancer consultation. You'd think someone would have called and said “you have pancreatic cancer and we would like you to have a consultation for your treatment options” rather than just sending a letter in the mail. Basically I was told that without surgery I had 1- 1/2 years to live. With surgery I could live 18-24 months which would equal about a six month life extension. I chose the surgery because I didn't want to live like a zombie on pain medication.

The surgery was called a pancreaticoduodenectomy or Whipple Procedure. A pancreaticoduodenectomy, Whipple procedure, or Kausch-Whipple procedure, is a major surgical operation involving the pancreas, duodenum, and other organs. This operation is performed to treat cancerous tumors on the head of the pancreas, malignant tumors involving common bile duct, duodenal papilla, or duodenum near the pancreas. It was patented in 1935. That's right I was going to have a surgical procedure that hasn't changed much in over 80 years. It takes a team of surgeons and about 8-9 hours of time in the operating room. It involved taking out the gall bladder, removing the head of the pancreas and part of the tail, removing 25% of the liver, disabling the valves of both pancreas and liver that control the flow of enzymes into the common bile duct, changing the location of the pancreas by moving it close to the spleen, removing 60% of the stomach, taking out the pyloric valve which is the gate keeper between the stomach and small intestines, removing the duodenum, and repositioning the jejunum junction so that the common bile duct drains directly into the upper portion of what remains of the stomach, removed an additional 5 feet of the

small intestine and repositioned the colon to adapt with all the other surgical work that was done.

When I woke up after the surgery my heart stopped beating. It took almost 4 minutes to regain a heartbeat. I was clinically dead just a little under 4 minutes. My body temperature rose to 105 degrees, both my lungs collapsed, I contracted pneumonia and my white blood cell count was off the charts. For three days I was out of it before waking up from the surgery alive.

There are numerous complications from the surgical procedure. The neural muscular system also known as the autonomic nervous system which regulates involuntary functions such as breathing, the pumping of blood, and no longer functions on its own. There are medications I take which stimulate these functions. I am now also a diabetic, and have a condition known as POTS which means Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome.

After being self supportive for 17 years I have run out of my own money due to the inability to work. It takes a team of 12 Medical Specialists at Mass General Hospital in Boston to keep me alive. Post-pancreatic cancer treatment is expensive.

Doctors are baffled because by all their medical standards I should be dead. I ask that you contribute to help me keep my home and be able to afford the drive to Boston and back about 2-4 times per month.

Over \$1,200.00 a month is needed for prescription drugs alone even at heavily discounted prices.

I am also looking for drivers who may occasionally want to provide transportation into Boston and back. I am trying to live on a yearly stipend that is equal to what I used to make in 6 weeks when I was working as a salesman.

Thank you, and GOD BLESS!