

# 1. How Will This Book Help You?

## The words that change your life forever...

How did you get entangled in the web that cancer weaves? Your life has been turned upside down by the phone call that no one wants to get:

“Your X ray showed a suspicious mass and we need to do more tests.” OR  
“Your biopsy showed cancer cells, and I’m going to send you to an Oncologist.”

These words will change your life forever. This happened to us when my husband got that phone call. An ultrasound on Friday evening resulted in an entirely unexpected call from his Primary care doctor on Monday morning. I happened to be at home, and because of my experience as an Oncologist, we were able to get through the next few weeks until he completed his treatment.

I had already begun writing this book to guide patients with newly diagnosed cancer when we got this phone call. It now became a more personal mission to bring this information to others faced with a cancer diagnosis.

I'm sorry, but your X ray showed a shadow. We need to do more tests and send you to a specialist



Figure 1.1

## You've just been diagnosed with Cancer. What happens next?

If you or a family member has just been diagnosed with cancer, you feel as if you've been run over by a truck. Now what? Your mind is overrun with a million questions.

In today's information age, you can run to the computer and do an information search. But you soon discover all these unfamiliar terms. What does Stage mean? What does Grade mean? Why are there so many treatment choices? Why can't the doctors just cut it out? The surgeon said they got it all. Why do I need chemotherapy? Why do I need both radiation and chemotherapy? These are only some of the questions that will concern you.

The impact of a cancer diagnosis differs at different ages and in different family situations. If you are young and have a family or spouse to look after, you wonder, "Will I live long enough to see my children grow up? Will my spouse be a single parent? How will he/ she cope? How do I tell my children; what do I tell my children?"

If your children have grown up, you still think, "How do I tell my children." In addition, your family might have their own opinions on what you should do. They might pull you, the patient, in different directions because of how they are reacting to the news. Taking care of the medical and emotional issues, while at the same time figuring out how to manage the social and financial problems, is a balancing act.



Figure 1.2

## Cancer affects not just you...

Cancer affects the *whole* family *emotionally* with the fear of losing you and *financially* if you are unable to work for a while and they are dependent on your income. Grown-up children are torn between helping you and taking care of their own families. They may have to take time off from their jobs to come to your appointments or take you to your treatments. They are pulled in different directions: their jobs, their family, and you. It can also affect their own sense of mortality because they are afraid that they may now be at greater risk of developing cancer.

## I don't understand the words. What do they mean? What are they talking about?

Medical professionals use technical terms that *they* use all the time thinking that those words are part of normal English language. Words in the medical language can have different meanings in everyday spoken language. Doctors don't realize that words we use routinely in a specific context can have an entirely different meaning for patients and their families. For example, we use the word "*invasive cancer*" in a very specific technical context. For the patient, however, the word *invasive* suggests whole body invasion. We will



Figure 1.3

discuss invasion further in Chapter (5) when we discuss the Pathology report.

By the time I see patients for their first Oncology consultation (see Chapter 6), they have searched several websites, and they arrive in my office with a pile of printouts, many of which are not relevant to their *own* situation. In addition, they have usually received conflicting information and advice. Over the years I have addressed these questions through lengthy conversations with my patients. My mission? Patients and their families need to understand and be comfortable with their treatment choices. As you develop a good relationship with your Oncologist and your medical team, you should have ongoing conversations about the goals of your treatment plan and your needs and wishes.

### So how will this book help you?

We will follow *Neal* - a patient diagnosed with lung cancer. We will meet him in Chapter 3 when he is admitted to the hospital with pneumonia. By following Neal's journey from *diagnosis to treatment*, this book will walk you through the information you will need to get through your own diagnosis, treatment, and beyond. The first few chapters will help you understand the difference between a normal cell and the cancer cell and will introduce the vocabulary that will be used in future chapters. Chapters on treatment and supportive care follow. Then we will discuss the way clinical trials are conducted, how statistics are used to evaluate cancer treatments, and how standards of treatments are developed. When you finish with treatment, you may face issues of survivorship, so we will talk about those. We will also consider ways to prevent cancer. Many checklists and worksheets are included that will help you gather and record the necessary information. You will find a glossary of terms with explanations at the end.

I will address the questions that are already swirling through your mind and questions you do not yet know that you should ask. You will meet the members of your future team. This book will help you prepare for your future visits and the procedures that you may go through. We will talk about the available resources that will help you through your treatments.

**Each chapter will end with an action plan** and questions to ask your team along the way. You can read through the chapters sequentially or skip ahead to the ones that you need the most now.

### Here is how the chapters are organized:

**Chapter 1** illustrates possible scenarios that may have brought you to this diagnosis.

**Chapter 2** describes the basic structure of a cell and considers how a normal cell becomes a cancer cell.

**Chapters 3 and 4** explain the process of making a cancer diagnosis.

**Chapter 5** will interpret the Pathology report.

**Chapter 6** gives helpful hints on how to get the most out of your consultations.

**Chapter 7** will explain what Staging means and why it is needed.

**Chapters 8 to 14** talk about treatment choices and discuss treatment related issues.

**Chapters 15 to 18** deal with practical questions of general advice, fertility, nutrition and genetics.

**Chapters 19 and 20** discuss Complementary Therapy and the Mind-Body Connection.

**Chapters 21 and 22** describe how clinical trials are developed and how treatments are evaluated.

**Chapter 23** deals with survivorship issues.

**Chapter 24** addresses your option of foregoing treatment and focusing simply on care and comfort.

**The Appendices** describe common medicines you may be prescribed along with checklists and work sheets. Much of this information, especially on cancer prevention and screening, may be of assistance to your entire family. At the end is a list of reliable resources to which you can refer.

### Who are the Specialists who treat cancer?

- **Radiation Oncologist:** Doctor who treats cancer with radiation therapy.
- **Medical Oncologist:** Doctor who treats cancer with chemotherapy, hormone therapy, targeted agents or immunotherapy.
- **Cancer Surgeon:** Surgeon who specializes in cancer surgery.
- **Hematologist:** Doctor who treats blood disorders. Blood disorders can be a bone marrow cancer like leukemia OR disorders like anemia or bleeding and clotting problems that are not cancers.

Often, specialists train in both Medical Oncology and Hematology and see both these categories of diseases. You may see a doctor in a Cancer Center for a benign anemia like an anemia related to iron or vitamin deficiency. Seeing the doctor in the Cancer Center does not mean you have cancer.

## ACTION PLAN

- Don't jump to conclusions. Wait until you get all your results.
- Be aware that web searches may not yield reliable information.
- Start making “healthful choices”: eat better, exercise and quit smoking.
- Get an agenda book or diary to keep track of your appointments and information.
- Read this book to prepare for your visits and as your guide to treatment.
- Make notes as you go along.