

Thyroid Cancer

A Guide for Patients

Second Edition 2010

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Foreword for Second Edition

Because I practice in a large medical center entirely devoted to the care of cancer patients, nearly every patient I see already knows they have thyroid cancer before they meet me. Most of them have had their thyroid surgery completed several days, if not a few worrisome weeks, prior to this initial visit. By this time, many patients have gathered support of a small group of family, friends, and loved ones who often accompany them to this visit (fortunately, my exam rooms can accommodate 5-6 worried family members). Often times, the fear, worry, apprehension, and dread of how I might answer the hundreds of questions that are circling in their minds are nearly palpable when I enter the exam room. In many cases, the countless hours they have spent trying to learn about thyroid cancer from friends, doctors, books, and the internet has resulted in a wide variety of often contradictory suggestions, treatment options, and opinions. Unfortunately, it is often impossible for them to determine if the information they obtained is correct or errant, if it applies to their specific case, or even if the information is up to date.

After the introductions, the pleasantries, and the warm smile, I usually start my consultations with: "So what did your doctor tell you about your thyroid cancer?"

More often than not, I find that most patients remember very little of the content of the visit when they were told they had thyroid cancer. They often remember bits and pieces of that conversation:

"It is a good cancer"

"Don't worry, we got it all"

"This is the most common type of thyroid cancer"

"I've never seen anyone die from thyroid cancer"

"It's no big deal, you will need a little radiation and everything will be fine"

"It is a slow growing cancer; you have probably had it for years"

"If I had to have a cancer, this is the one I would want"

While I am sure that the doctors meant well with each of these statements, they are usually regarded as unhelpful attempts at minimizing the incredible emotional and psychological impact of being told that you have "cancer". While most of my patients don't remember the details and specifics that the doctor told them that day, it is clear to me that they never forget that day....and that day changed their life forever.

Not surprisingly, each patient (and family member) has a host of very important questions that need to be answered during this initial consultation. Usually, these initial questions relate to prognosis, treatment plans, and the potential impact of thyroid cancer on daily life:

“What is the next step?”

“What is going to happen to me?”

“Can we beat this thing?”

“Am I going to see my kids graduate from high school?”

“Can you cure me?”

“When will I go into remission?”

“Is my hair going to fall out?”

“Can I keep working?”

“Can I have children in the future after we take care of this?”

“Does radioactive iodine hurt?”

“Explain this pathology report to me”,

“What stage am I?”

“Am I going to be okay?”

“If they got it all, why do I need radioactive iodine?”

“How often do I have to come back for checkups and treatments?”

A thoughtful, honest, caring answer to each of these questions provides a framework of understanding and trust that is critical to a successful doctor-patient relationship. Patients cannot make informed decisions until they understand the answers to these, and a long list of other important questions. As many of my patients have told me, knowledge is power. However, it quickly becomes obvious that the amount of information and knowledge necessary to successfully cope with a new diagnosis of thyroid cancer cannot possibly be conveyed in a single office visit with even the most experienced thyroid cancer physician and the most knowledgeable patient.

Fortunately, this book provides easily understandable, clear, concise answers to nearly all of the common questions that patients ask me in the office, on follow up phone calls, and at survivorship conferences. Simply reviewing the table of contents shows the breadth and depth of the topics covered by this book. Written by experts in the field, and augmented by an incredible chapter from thyroid cancer survivors, this book provides up to date, accurate, and understandable must-read information for all thyroid cancer patients and their families.

By learning the basics and the common concepts of thyroid cancer, the patient is better able to understand the disease, and actively participate in decision making with their physician. This allows the time in the physician’s office to be focused on specific questions that are unique to their case with less time spent talking about the generalities of thyroid cancer management. Since office visits are often quite short, it is critical that patients do their home work before coming to the visit and be ready with specific issues that need to be dealt with during that visit.

Many of my patients describe their experience with thyroid cancer as a journey. A journey that is always present, often scary, frequently frustrating, and at times it seems, never ending. Knowledge, education and information can make the journey easier, more predictable, and at times, less worrisome. The fear of the unknown can be disabling, and while there is much that

is not known about thyroid cancer, there is very much that is known. I am certain that the information contained in this book can facilitate your journey by providing accurate, easily understandable answers to the hundreds of questions that always accompany a diagnosis of thyroid cancer. While the journey is never care free, and seldom without worry, is it manageable with appropriate advice and education.

This book will provide the information necessary for you to help your physicians optimize and customize many aspects of the journey for your individual situation. While the journey is seldom easy, it can be productive, rewarding, and even enriching when accurate information and shared decision making leads to a mutual understanding of the risk and benefits of proposed treatments, the most likely clinical outcomes, and the impact that the diagnosis and treatment of thyroid cancer may have on your life plans.

I wish you the best in your journey, and encourage you to use the information contained in this book as a resource, a source of information, and an encouragement as you continue your journey as a thyroid cancer survivor.

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