

DEALING WITH PROSTATE CANCER – a wife’s story

Hearing the word “cancer” didn’t quite hit me right away. When Dan told me the results from his biopsy, I knew he purposely made it sound like it was just a little thing. He said they found two small spots of cancer. The first thing that came to my mind was “ok, we will deal with this, they can just go in and zap it away”.

When meeting with the urologist, the first thing he said was “you have to have surgery to remove your prostate”. I was shocked, it was all too fast. “Wait”, I said, “there has to be other options, such as radiation?” No, he explained, if we did radiation, the cancer could come back and if it did, surgery would not be an option. This was a lot to digest. Obviously we need to get rid of the cancer, and if surgery was the best option, we were on board. However, both of us knew of the two side effects lurking in the back of our minds: Incontinence and Erectile Dysfunction. We knew we didn’t have a choice and we both agreed we would deal with the side effects accordingly. The surgery was a must.

Dan’s urologist was adamant about referring us to a colleague of his who specializes in robotic surgery at USC. We took the pamphlet with us and on the drive home, we looked at each and decided, we did not want to go to USC. We live in Orange County, we want to find a superb surgeon in our area and we remembered our primary doctor mentioning the robotics program at UCI Irvine. I immediately went to the internet and searched for robotic surgeons at UCI and the first picture that popped up was Dr. Thomas Ahlering. Reading about Dr. A was astonishing. He was known as one of the best Urologic Oncology & Robotic surgeons in the nation. I did not even continue to research surgeons, I *knew* he was the one. I sent the link to Dan and within 10 minutes he was on the phone with Dr. A’s office and had an appointment set up to meet him.

The first thing I did once I knew we were going forward with the robotic surgery was research the hell out of it! I was obsessed with learning every detail about what we were facing, as a team. The most jarring fact I learned was that the seminal vesicles, which carries the semen, would be removed, therefore Dan would not be able to produce semen. I admit, for the first 24 hours after learning that, I was a bit sad/mad. But then I took light of it and told Dan that we’ve been together for over 23 years, I’ve seen plenty of it and I really wasn’t going to miss it at all. “Less mess”, I told him. And to this day, nine months later, I do not miss it.

Watching the numerous surgery videos, I was very nervous for Dan and what his body would be put through. However, I knew we would get through this, we’ve been through a lot of things throughout the 23 years and by golly we would get through this as well.

THE WEEKEND BEFORE SURGERY

Dan's surgery was scheduled for July 20, 2016. The weekend before, we decided to get a hotel room for the night, have one last "hoorah" as we knew things were going to change. That weekend was one of my most memorable weekends together! It was fantastic! Then came Monday and Tuesday. We tried to give it a go those two days before the surgery on Wednesday morning, but obviously there was too much on our minds, so we just held onto each other and cuddled those two nights.

THE DAY OF SURGERY

The morning of the surgery, waking up at 3:00am to get to the surgery center by 5:30am, on the drive over, it was like walking the plank. I was very nervous, to say the least, about the procedure. It was going to be a long, major surgery. Dan has never had any type of surgery nor has he ever been admitted to a hospital. I trusted Dr. A with his life, but in the back of my mind I was frantic about the general anesthesia. I've read and heard of too many stories about complications with general anesthesia. That was my biggest concern.

We arrived at the surgery center in the dark morning hour at 5:30am. It was very eerie to arrive at the surgery center in the dark, with nobody else was around. However, walking into this beautiful surgery center was very welcoming. We checked in, did some paper work and finally Nurse Alma came out to get Dan, to get him prepped for surgery. I was a nervous wreck. I was pacing - I went to the front desk and asked the receptionist how many other patients were expected today. Her reply was "you are the only one". I was so relieved to know that at the very least I had the entire waiting room to myself, so when I did have my little breakdowns, nobody would be there to witness it. And the most obvious relief was that Dan had all of the doctors, nurses and assistants' full attention.

At around 6:15am my sister and brother-in-law arrived. They were my support system and as soon as I saw them walk through the doors, I immediately broke down and cried. A few minutes later I was able to go in to see Dan. I visited with him for a few minutes, I could tell they had given him a little "cocktail" to relax him. I then brought my sister and brother-in-law in to see him. Nurse Alma was very sweet, making small talk to try to get our minds off of what we knew was happening soon. Shortly thereafter, Dr. A came in along with his surgical assistant and the anesthesiologist. We made more small talk and then Dan was ready to go into surgery. I will never forget how I looked into his eyes, silently praying everything would be ok. I tried not to cry as I kissed him, but I could not help it, I cried. The nurse told me he was in the best of hands and I truly believed it. My sister and brother-in-law had already walked back into the waiting room and as I walked out, I broke down again in their arms. How I was going to get through the next few hours, I didn't know.

The next few hours were the longest hours of my life. Nurse Alma kept coming out from the operating room, walking into the back room to get bags of what looked like saline solution. The first couple of times she came out, I thought something was wrong, but she assured me Dan was doing wonderful. After about three hours, I expected Dr. A to be walking out at any moment, telling me all was well, however, the clock kept ticking. Then it went into the fourth hour. By this time I am now really worried, all I did was stare at the floor, shaking, walking around, tried to get fresh air, but I just could not relax or focus, it was all just a blur. At one point another nurse, who turned out to be the recovery nurse, Amy, came out and sat down next to me, rubbed my back and told me everything was fine and that I should go lie down in our private room until he is out of surgery. I cried. I told her no, I had my sister and brother-in-law there with me, I'd be fine.

At 12:30pm, it is now 4 ½ hours into the surgery. I was getting annoyed. I went up to the receptionist and asked what was happening. She said Dr. A started late, he started the surgery at 8:00am. Ok, I understand, but we are now going on hour five!!! Finally, at 1:00pm Dr. A came out. He asked if I wanted to go back into our private room to discuss the surgery and I said yes. He told me that the surgery went very well but it was complicated. Dan's prostate was very large and so close to the nerves that it took him much longer to perform the surgery, but he was able to spare the nerves. This was the biggest relief to me! I was so grateful for Dr. A and looking back now, he could have easily been frustrated because of the difficulty getting to the prostate and just cut the nerves in order to be done with it. But he didn't, and this is why Dr. A is the most wonderful surgeon there is!

RECOVERY ROOM

After about an hour, I was able to go in to see Dan. I was not prepared for this. Because his surgery had taken so much longer, the anesthesiologist really had to "give him the gas" as he put it. So coming out of it, Dan was a mess. Again, I cried (but Dan didn't know/doesn't remember). Nurse Amy was taking such good care of Dan, trying to get him to come around, and he still had a while to go so she gently took my arm and led me to our private room, gave me a warm blanket, told me to lie down and get some rest because I was going to need my strength when he came out of it. I slept for about an hour, I could tell I was just exhausted. Around 4:00pm Dan was finally able to get up and walk from the recovery bed to our room. He was shocked when he looked at the clock and asked if it was really 4:00pm in the afternoon, as he only remembers going into surgery at around 7:00am.

Throughout the night, Nurse Amy came in to take his vitals and get him up to walk around. This is the most important thing to do after a surgery like Dan's. We walked around the waiting room, we walked around the nurse's station - we actually walked into the operating room and met the robot that assisted with Dan's surgery. In between, Dan slept. I didn't really sleep that night. I would doze off for a while but then while Dan slept, I just watched him, thanking God

that everything went well and at the same time, thinking what a long road we had ahead of us. Would things go back to the way they were? Would he have to wear pads because of the incontinence? Would we ever be able to have sex? These things should be the least of my worries, because thankfully the cancer was gone. However, I would be a fool if I said it never crossed my mind.

TODAY

It's been nine months since Dan's surgery. I think he is one lucky man. The day following removal of his catheter he achieved an erection. And about a week after removal of the catheter, he was pad free. Also, for his nine month check-up with Dr. A, he is still cancer free.

We have learned not to take life for granted, don't sweat the small stuff, appreciate life and appreciate each other. And we have done just that. We will be celebrating 24 years together and 23 years of marriage this weekend and we are actually going back to the hotel that we were at last July. He's the love of my life! And we both "*Cherish Life*".