

## **Patient Experience – Prostate Cancer**

**Tony Dowzall**

### **Prior to the Operation**

There has been much written about the need for PSA tests and the type of options available to men once a Prostate Cancer diagnosis has been made, thus the following diary relates to my experience post diagnosis, through surgical procedure and recovery.

Once diagnosed with Prostate cancer, and you have made a decision to have your prostate removed, the next decision is who, where and when.

In my case due to an enlarged prostate, I had been visiting a local Urology practice for some years and it was my Urologist who performed a biopsy, informed me about the result and recommended surgery. As I had not received a great caring experience with the practice during and after biopsy, was feeling uneasy about 'just moving forward'. The team seemed disconnected from each other, which made me feel more like a number than a person.

After diagnosis, I remember talking to my Cardiologist about the need for Prostate surgery, and he made the following statement 'the area is a delicate part of the male anatomy, thus seek out the best to do the job'. So with this ringing in my ears I started my search. I talked to a good friend who encouraged me to ask and seek information regarding the number of operations the surgeon has conducted and their patient recovery rates in terms of continence and sexual function.

During this time I continued following up with my Urologist, taking a CT scan and Chest x-ray to confirm whether the cancer was still contained within my prostate. Both tests proved negative.

After some research I came across Dr. Ahlering and his bio at UCI, which included a great deal of information about his numbers and extensive experience using a minimal invasive surgical procedure using the Da Vinci Surgical system. I called his practice and had a very positive call with his assistant who asked me to provide some basic documentation allowing an appointment to be scheduled.

I also talked to our family doctor who provided me with an additional highly qualified Urologist, Dr Yoshida at Hoag Hospital. I had read positive reports about Dr. Yoshida, thus decided to reach out to him following my appointment with Dr. Ahlering.

During the next few weeks I completed and sent to Dr. Ahlering information regarding my PSA results, biopsy outcome and general health. During our 1.5hr meeting he went through this in great detail. I noted he had marked up multiple pages which he kept referring to during our discussion, reinforcing my confidence. He also talked about options to remove my lymph glands which had not been mentioned to me before. The result of the discussion was that he wanted me to undergo an MRI to provide another view of my prostate, which I thought was a great example of his attention to detail.

Throughout this period, the staff around Dr. Ahlering, were highly professional, always following up. I felt they were empathetic to my natural fears and wanted to do everything to reassure me. It was also clear to me that they were a team.

The MRI was scheduled and completed efficiently at UCI. The radiologist who took me through the process spoke glowingly of Dr. Ahlering. After the MRI Dr. Ahlering talked to me again, informing me

that the diagnosis had reconfirmed the biopsy result, meaning the cancer had not spread further in the Prostate, thus we could move forward with setting a date!

At this stage, based on all the positive interaction with Dr. Ahlering, his team and facility, I had made my decision to entrust them with my prostate removal – March 28th!

In addition, to try and overcome some of my own mental fears about the surgery and recovery, I had decided to treat the event as if I was preparing for a 10K race. Thus I began increasing my weight training and run distances in an attempt to give myself the best possible outcome. In my mind this was the least I could do to help Dr. Ahlering and his medical team.

Two weeks prior to surgery, I attended a pre operation review, to be 'signed off' for surgery. I spent almost 2.5hrs with a nurse and doctor, being medically examined and going through a very informative pre-operation check list. Frankly some of this discussion was embarrassing and I complimented the nurse on the sympathetic way she handled such a difficult subject. I departed feeling positive about the nurse and the detailed information she had provided.

The next 12 days were spent training hard, purchasing the prescribed medications, soft foods and practicing those important pelvic exercises.

### **Day of Operation and first 24hrs.**

The Tuesday morning of surgery I had woken and taken a shower using the antibacterial soap which had been provided at the pre surgery meeting. I used an enema to empty my bowels, necessary but not enjoyable! Then we drove to the Surgery Center and checked in at 11.00am for my 1.00pm surgery. We completed minor paper work... then were led through to the pre-op area where I disrobed and put on a gown, socks and blue hair net. I lied down and my nurse told me to take deep breaths, smile and think positive... as it was noticeable that I was feeling highly apprehensive... true! She placed on leg squeezers which inflate and deflate, then inserted IV's into both of my arms and started hydrating me. Next the anesthesiologist came and asked me questions about when I last ate, drank, allergies etc. He told me to relax and enjoy a good dream with the 'happy juice'... My last memory was being rolled out of the room, leaving my wife.

My first recollection post-surgery, was being asked to get up and walk. I remember being helped into a sitting position, carefully moving my legs over the side of bed however, not wanting to move any further. I was subsequently told that they had put me in a wheel chair and took to me my room which I have zero recollection.

At 1.30am, I remember talking to the nurse and being encouraged to get up and walk around the ward. We completed two laps before getting back into bed. After this I watched some TV... channel 9, then fell asleep as the 'anti-wrinkle' infomercials were the last thing I wanted to watch! Waking up again, I remember having an urge to urinate but not being able to, so the nurse helped me up and we walked around the ward, which facilitated the flow of urine through my catheter.

The nurse then told me that Dr Ahlering was due in at 6.30am to see me, and my wife would be coming to pick me up. I guess this surprised me, as I was not expecting to be going home so soon after the surgery.

Around 6.30am, the nurse 'introduced' me to my catheter and helped me to connect it to 'my new friend' the bag attached to my leg. She then helped me change and dress into my clothes. It was then that I first viewed the six incisions across my tummy. One, two inches just above my belly button the others, smaller incisions either side. All were a little bloody and bruised, sealed with glue (no stitches), however nothing alarming and I could not feel any pain.

My wife arrived and told me she had visited with my daughter the previous evening however, I was still sleeping in the recovery room. Dr Ahlering came in and told us the operation was a success, no complications, everything removed easily. He told me I looked well, and said I should walk about a quarter mile during the day, and take a shower after 5.00pm.

After this we ate some breakfast, apparently we had both ordered the same... yogurt, oatmeal and fruits... which made us laugh. At this stage, cannot say I was very hungry however, I ate about half of the bowl. Then at 7.30am... I was 'wheeled out' of the Surgery Center and driven home... wow!

During the morning, I potted around our house, not really sure what to do... getting used to emptying my new friend. Although I was not hungry, I ate some light lunch, then decided to venture out. I slowly walked a small circle around our community... nothing strenuous... felt like an old man... but hey... the day before I was still in the operating theater. I remember thinking how fantastic it was that within 24hrs of surgery I was walking in the glorious Californian sunshine. After returning I went to see my 86yr old neighbor to tell him I had survived, and show off my war wounds... we had a good laugh at that one!

During the afternoon I took a rest, drank water, placed an ice pack on my tummy, and then potted around some more. I remember getting worried that I was feeling the need to urinate however, not seeing anything flow into my leg bag. I recalled having this experience at the hospital and the nurse encouraging me to walk around. So I walked around although without improvement. I then sat down and slightly squeezed the end of my catheter tube, and out popped a few pieces of bloody material. The flow of urine came and I felt relieved and much better. Suffice to say, over the course of the first day, I overachieved Dr. Ahlering's walk mileage... by some margin!

I had a small evening meal, following the light food instructions given to me in the pre operation pack. I then took the prescribed pain medication, stool softener and went up to rest. I made sure to place an ice pack on my tummy to aid the bruising, then soon went to sleep.

### **Post Operation**

On Thursday morning I woke up and got up on my own... a little difficult as my stomach muscles were not working so well. I ate a light breakfast then ventured into the shower. This made me feel a lot better, and in hindsight, I should have taken one the night before. I then went out, chatted briefly to my neighbor telling him I was ready to resume weight training... haha... then walked around our community. I returned and did some office work, then decided to go out for a short pre-lunch walk. My nurse called, to check-in and ensure I was smiling😊, and everything was going well.

After lunch, I took a rest... although, soon get bored... felt some slight chills, although nothing to worry about. Late afternoon, I visited my neighbor and we went out for a walk, taking my daily mileage to 3.2 miles. At the end of the day, I felt that I had established a good daily schedule of walking, resting and drinking (water!).

On Friday, the next milestone to overcome was to achieve a first bowel movement. This came after a soft breakfast and prune juice... yes, those prunes do work! Also, as I had only taken two pain medication tablets on Thursday, I decided to try without, which proved to be no problem. My chills continued, so when the nurse called, I relayed this information and Dr. Alhering prescribed a course of antibiotics. I put a mid-afternoon walk into my routine and ended the day achieving 4.5 miles.

On Saturday, I felt a little lethargic, so started the course of antibiotics. Then I continued to push on with my walk/rest/drink routine. I took four walks during the day, allowing me to over-achieve my 5 mile goal. Dr Ahlering's assistant communicated with me on both days over the weekend, checking on my health, which was above and beyond. Sunday and Monday came and went without any further challenges, walking 5 and 6 miles respectfully.

Tuesday was the big day for saying goodbye to my new friend and catheter removal. We had flagged this on the calendar with a huge smiley face... although, as we travelled to the Surgery Center I felt a degree of trepidation. My wonderful nurse was there again and she quietly took all my vitals, checked my incisions, giving me positive encouraging words about how well I was healing. Next she explained what she would do, reassuring me that catheter removal would be pain free. Then she asked me to disrobe and place a sheet over my tummy. Next she attached a syringe to the second tube which deflated the bag holding the catheter inside my bladder. Then she asked me to take a few deep breaths and a few seconds later, it was all over. Yes I could feel the catheter coming out however, it was not painful.

I had also envisioned not being able to control my bladder, which proved not to be the case. I dressed, put on my diaper... then listened to the nurses instructions for the need to pee in the next 4 hours. She provided me some follow up paper work and it was over. We gave each other a large hug and said our goodbyes.

The next phase of recovery was to regain bladder control, which I had had 7 days to think and worry about! Well three hours after removal, I urinated with only a mild feeling of burning, and made it through the day without an incident. Next came bedtime and the big test. This again proved to be a non-event as I got through the night dry. The same occurred on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> nights... which increased my confidence in trusting my own body and removing the pads.

Maybe I am not the norm... however, just thankful that through the skill of Dr Ahlering and maybe my active lifestyle, the healing process was going far better than I had ever envisioned.

Three weeks on from my surgery, I re-started training and light jogging... 4 miles around the park. Now, when I look back, the hardest part for me, was to maintain patience... walk before running!

### **Postscript:**

Six weeks following surgery, my weight training and running times returned to pre surgery levels. That said, this did not just happen!

The early weeks of running were hard as when I started my first running laps, I had the feeling that the inside of my bottom was not connected to the outside. Gradually this feeling disappeared, I guess things got re-connected! Additionally, during running I felt the urge to pee, thus the need to focus and tighten my pelvic muscle. Over the weeks the feeling slowly dissipated, although it's still with me.

During weigh training, I have had to concentrate and ensure my pelvic muscles are tight as, at the re-start of training, I had maybe two instances of minor leakage when I placed severe pressure on my body.

Sexual function returned within 30 days... so I stopped taking Sildenafil. This was a relief as I felt highly embarrassed asking the pharmacist for the prescription. What must have been going through her mind looking at me the old man!

Like many before me, am highly impressed with Dr, Ahlering and his team. They are completely in sync with each other and communication is outstanding. As such, am confident in reporting to both my Cardiologist and anyone else who asks, that I found the BEST Urology surgeon and team.

**Observations/Suggestions:**

- Seek advice, ask friends. This is not a subject men want to talk about however, you will be surprised how many men have been effected by this form of cancer.
- Try and get your mind and body in the best possible shape prior to the surgery. If you do not train then practice walking as you will need many miles post operation. Set yourself goals, this will help post-surgery.
- Have faith during the journey in the doctor's/nurses... tell them everything... no matter how trivial.
- Be patient... walk before you can run... steps to success.
- Purchase some sport athletic pants with zips on the bottom. These will help during the 7 days with your new 'friend' the catheter leg bag.
- Once your leg bag is attached, place a pen mark on the top and bottom holes to which the button goes through. This will help you remember which hole to use when you strap on your bag.
- As surgery is a 'step' on our journey, keep up with your PSA tests, as something could still be there.
- Always remember why you're doing this... to enjoy many more years of life!

Thank you Doctor Ahlering for giving me the potential for a future. Your leadership and skill is reflected throughout your wonderful caring team who navigated me through this phase of my journey and treated me as if I was one of your own family.