

DR LOVE: Welcome to the Heart of Oncology. This is medical oncologist Dr Neil Love. The diagnosis of cancer is a major life challenge to anyone, but the disease can be particularly intimidating for older patients. You are about to meet a 76-year-old man treated with chemotherapy for non-Hodgkin's lymphoma of the stomach. This patient and his wife told me a remarkable story about facing this situation that is a lesson in courage for all of us. The patient began by describing how his retirement lifestyle was suddenly interrupted by the disease.

MR S: I'm a very active person. I go to the workout center three days a week. I work out. And I'm active — I play golf one day a week. We were going to the beach. We do some volunteer work. We volunteer for the Ronald McDonald House soup kitchen, and I've always been in pretty good health.

It started out, one night I woke up with a stomachache. It wasn't real bad, but it was a stomachache. The next morning, I didn't think anything of it, so I mentioned it to my wife. She said, "I want you to go and see our gastrologist."

So she got me an appointment with him and he talked to me. He says, "Well, it's probably nothing, but let's take a look down in your stomach." So he ran a test, and he called me a couple of days later and said it was lymphoma, cancer. So he asked me what cancer doctor I'd want, and Dr Hart is a member of our church. We were real close. So I told him I'd like to go see Dr Hart.

DR LOVE: I'm curious what the reaction was for both of you when you found out that this was a cancer.

MRS S: Oh, it was devastating.

MR S: She was upset more than me. I told myself when they said I had cancer, "I don't know anything about cancer, just what I've heard. I must leave my health to Dr Hart and to the good Lord."

And I prayed about it. And I've just relaxed. I haven't thought any more of it. I go for my treatments, and that's about all I can say.

MRS S: I worried enough for both of us. It made me very sick. I had to go to a psychiatrist because I couldn't handle it. I'm okay now. George never seemed to be concerned about it.

MR S: No. No.

MRS S: I always thought that maybe he was just trying to act like that because he didn't want me to be concerned about it. But I was very concerned. I thought, "Well, what am I doing to do? What's going to happen to us? What if he dies? What am I going to do?"

DR LOVE: When you met with Dr Hart to go through what was going on, what did he explain to you in terms of what type of tumor it was and what the plan was going to be?

MR S: He said it was in my stomach, and it was a lymphoma. He said, "I'm going to start you out with chemo, and you're going to take treatments in chemo. Then, after that, you can take some radiation, and we'll go from there."

Then he said, "Your health is good." He said, "You have a good attitude."

My health is still pretty good. Like I say, I'm still working out and doing the things that I normally do. And he said, "I think you'll get through this okay."

MRS S: He was very optimistic, actually.

MR S: Yes.

MRS S: He says that he really thinks that it's going to be curable.

DR LOVE: Was that a surprise to you?

MRS S: Yes.

MR S: Yes.

DR LOVE: What had you heard about cancer or thought about cancer?

MRS S: You always think about the bad things of cancer. Dying.

MR S: Yes. And that's really what I thought. I said, "Well, maybe there's nothing can be done."

But after I talked to Dr Hart I felt better and, like I said, I just didn't worry about it. I think not worrying has helped me more than anything — any medicine or anything else.

DR LOVE: What did he tell you to expect in terms of side effects or problems from the chemo?

MRS S: He told him that he might lose some of his hair, but he didn't think so.

MR S: No.

MRS S: But he might. Actually, George got along very well. He did lose a little hair, but he got it back.

MR S: It grew back.

DR LOVE: When you were receiving the chemotherapy, did you have any sickness to your stomach, nausea, vomiting?

MR S: Never.

DR LOVE: Did you feel very tired during the chemotherapy?

MR S: No.

DR LOVE: Normal energy level?

MRS S: No.

MR S: I didn't work out at all during the chemo, did I?

MRS S: No.

DR LOVE: So you stopped working out?

MR S: Yes.

DR LOVE: Were you able to do your other sort of daily activities?

MR S: Yes.

DR LOVE: Did he have as much energy as normal?

MRS S: No, he did not.

DR LOVE: How difficult a problem was it? Was he in bed?

MRS S: No, no, no. He was never in bed. He just didn't have the get-up-and-go that he had.

DR LOVE: It sounds like while you were getting the chemotherapy, other than some tiredness, it really didn't have a big effect on you.

MR S: No.

MRS S: It didn't.

DR LOVE: Was that surprising to you?

MRS S: Was to me.

MR S: Yes.

DR LOVE: You were expecting it to be a lot more difficult?

MRS S: Yes, because we read all the books and things that they gave us. And they indicated that it would be, but he was very fortunate.

DR LOVE: What's your take on this whole experience?

MR S: I'm excited about it.

DR LOVE: Are you surprised about what happened?

MR S: Well, I'm surprised that it happened that fast, but like I say — I just didn't worry about it. Because I figure, if I start worrying about it, that's the worst thing I could do. I think anybody today that gets cancer should try not to worry about it and try to live a normal good life, if you can.

MRS S: And go see Dr Hart.

MR S: Yes. Go see Dr Hart.

DR LOVE: What was it like to go to his office and see people with all the different kinds of problems?

MRS S: It was an absolutely devastating thing. When you go into a place and you see rows of recliner chairs and people in every one of them with a needle in them. It's really an eye opener.

MR S: Yes.

MRS S: It's almost unbelievable.

DR LOVE: In what way?

MRS S: Well, you just can't believe that that many people have cancer.

MR S: And we're not doing enough for cancer. That's my personal opinion. I just don't think the government — I don't think anybody is doing enough.

DR LOVE: If you were going to sit down with another couple who was exactly where you were at the time — at the very beginning. You had your biopsy. You're going to your doctor. Your doctor said, "I think you should get chemotherapy, radiation therapy." What would you say to them? Any advice you would give them?

MR S: The first thing I'd say is, "Don't worry about it because worry is going to put you in the grave faster. Try to live as much normal life as you can. And then you listen to the doctors. If they say do something, you should do it, because they know more about cancer than you do."

I think living a normal life is the number one thing that helped me with the cancer. And I think if I talked to anyone else, I would suggest to them that they should try to live as normal life as possible. As much as possible, enjoy their family and wife and —

MRS S: And their friends. We continue to go dancing.

MR S: Yes.

MRS S: We didn't dance quite as often as we did before, but we continued to do everything. We went out with our friends and we were doing things that we like to do. We did them before I had cancer — she plays her bridge and I play my golf on Monday or Tuesday and we go out on Thursday, dancing. We play our cards on Wednesday. We didn't try to change our life. I just wasn't going to let the cancer beat me. That's the way I'm going to feel. I would tell anybody else, "Oh, no. Don't let the cancer beat you." I'd say, "You can beat it."

MRS S: Well, we can't always...

MR S: Well, no, you can't always. But you can sure try.

DR LOVE: For many of us the thought of a person in their seventies being treated with combination chemotherapy is a difficult concept to embrace. This patient and his wife are an example of how it is possible to face this type of challenging treatment situation and triumph over it. This indeed is part of the Heart of Oncology. This is medical oncologist Dr Neil Love.