THE IMPORTANCE OF HOPE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CANCER

Whether we are the person diagnosed with cancer or a family member or friend, we all know how important it is to be able to hold onto hope in the midst of the cancer journey. Too often we hear only the cancer prognosis, cancer statistics, side-effects of cancer treatments, etc. and seldom hear anyone explaining the difference between the expectations which a cancer patient can have, but also the important part which hope has in the fight against cancer. Victory in the Valley is grateful to Dr. Shaker Dakhil who first shared his thoughts about the differences between hope and expectations in a presentation to the Victory in the Valley Cancer Support Group, several years ago. He gave VV his permission to share his thoughts with cancer patients and their supporters, desiring that it might have a positive impact on their cancer journey.

HOPE AND EXPECTATIONS by Dr. Shaker Dakhil, MD

While dealing with terminal cancer patients for 20 years, I frequently have been faced with the following dilemma: How to be truthful to the patients and “tell it like it is” and, at the same time, avoid destroying their hopes and plunging them into despair? As a matter of fact, this dilemma not only is relevant to the medical profession, but also to the clergy, social workers and support personnel dealing with patients. After struggling for many years, I finally found the answer in my “religious faith.”

See, there is a difference between the concept of “Expectations” and the concept of “Hope.” When I talk to patients now, I explain to them clearly what to “expect” from our scientific treatments, what to “expect” during the course of their illness and the “expected” outcome of their disease. But “hope” is much more than dry scientific facts. “Hope” relates primarily to one’s religious beliefs and roots.

A Christian has the right to believe in Jesus’ miracles and hope he will be the recipient of one and beat all anticipated expectations for his outcome. Other religious sects have their own “hopes” and aspirations, which have to be respected.

To illustrate the difference between “expectations” and “hope” to my patients, I remind them of the analogy of the lottery ticket: If you buy a lottery ticket, you certainly do not “expect” to win, but you “hope” to hit the jackpot and beat all the odds. You continue to hope until the drawing is over. Similarly, as long as there is life, there is hope – even though the expectations for recovery might be poor. Once I started making a clear distinction between “expectation” and “hope” in my own mind, I became so much more at peace with myself and with my relating to terminally ill patients. So, I pass it on for whatever it is worth.

In 1980, when I was first diagnosed with cancer, I asked my doctor if I was going to die. He said that there was no treatment at that time that was effective against my type of cancer and nothing that could be done. While I always want the truth from my doctors, it was a devastating blow to me. I have often thought back on that conversation and wondered why all hope was taken from me at that moment? Sometimes, I think that there may be the fear of giving “false hope” to a patient, but I have learned through my own cancer journey that we can allow and even encourage each other to hold onto hope, even in the midst of a poor prognosis, because hope truly does fill every day. No one knows for sure how someone will respond or not respond to a specific treatment. Our immune systems are each different and are miraculously made to fight cancer and other disease processes. As Dr. Dakhil said, “As long as there is life, there is hope.”

As a cancer survivor, I look back on my cancer journey and see how vitally important it was for me to have people in my life, both personally and professionally, who not only allowed me to have hope in the midst of a poor cancer prognosis, but who emphasized to me that we are not statistics, there is always hope that the treatments will control or destroy the cancer, there are new treatments being researched, there is hope for a better day today and tomorrow, there is hope for a remission and even a possible cure, and lovingly reminded me that the eternal hope which we receive from God, no earthly circumstance can ever take away from us.

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“HOPE”...
What A Difference A Word Can Make

The doctor said, “It’s cancer,” though I prayed it wasn’t true
As my hopes began to shatter, he assured me, “life’s not through.”

I asked for each statistic... “Could there be a cure for me?”
Listening to each treatment plan...there were no guarantees.

But the doctor shared these healing words...
Changed my perspective as I heard him say...
“Expectations for a cure may be good or poor...
But where there’s life...there is **HOPE** today!”

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(Written in honor of Dr. Shaker Dakhil, author of “Hope And Expectations”
& in honor of my oncologist, Dr. Nicholas Papadopoulos,
who shared a similar philosophy of the importance of hope
for those fighting cancer.)