

Alan Holtzman: Life with CLL, One Day at a Time

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Alan Holtzman

Patient Advocate

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Andrew Schorr:

Hello and welcome to Patient Power. I'm Andrew Schorr. Like many people with chronic lymphocytic leukemia, CLL, Alan Holtzman was diagnosed after a routine physical.

Alan Holtzman:

A friend of mine had just passed away from cancer, so my wife and I had only been married for like a year-and-a-half at that point, and she said to me, "When are you going to go for a physical?" So, okay. All right. Beat me up enough, I went and got the physical, and sure enough there it was. My blood counts were elevated, and the doctor said either I got one heck of an infection, or you've got leukemia. And that was the beginning of the adventure.

The reaction to it was, you know, I just didn't know how to deal with it at that point because I really needed more information, and it did take me by surprise, and I was kind of upset but slowly worked my way through it.

Andrew Schorr:

Alan feels that his life was touched by an angel when a chance meeting with someone who turned out to be another CLL patient led him to connect with a leading CLL specialist.

Alan Holtzman:

Well, I had been being treated by a small hematology/oncology clinic in the Clear Lake, Texas area where I lived. Very nice fellow. Everything he told me, by the way, came true in the end, but I'd never met anybody else who had the disease. So I was sitting on the back of my boat one day, having a—enjoying a beer in the wonderful Texas sunshine, heard the roar of engines and looked

over the side and there was another boat backing in. And the boat had on the back of it "Home Port Chattanooga, Tennessee.

So I said to—it looked like he needed some help because it was a very windy day, so I helped him with his lines, got him all set and set up, and I started to talk to the fellow and he invited me on board for a beer because I was so nice to help him.

I said, "What are you going to be doing here?" And I said, "Boy, what a wonderful trip you just had, and why are you here for?" And he said, "Well, I'm going to be here for 90 days." I said, "Really, that's wonderful. We'll be neighbors for 90 days. Can I ask you why you're going to be here?" He says, "I'm in a study at MD Anderson Cancer Center." Of course, made me kind of bad for him, you know. Anybody down here, obviously he's got cancer, and I didn't really think of myself as having cancer.

And he said—I said, "Do you mind of I ask you what type of cancer you have?" And he says, "No, I'm not ashamed of it." He says, "I" have CLL, chronic lymphocytic leukemia. I looked at him and with great surprise I said, "So do I."

And his answer to me was, "Is Dr. Keating your doctor?" And I said, "No, it's not. This little fellow down here is." And he says, "Well, he's not anymore. Dr. Keating is your doctor, and he'll give you a call in a couple of days." Two days later, I heard from MD Anderson. I've been there ever since.

Andrew Schorr:

Alan was in watch-and-wait mode for more than 6 years, but eventually he needed treatment and enrolled in a clinical trial. I asked Alan about his experience as a participant in a clinical trial.

Alan Holtzman:

For me it has been life saving, at least in my mind it has, you know. There's no proof and there's no way to really follow it in that particular respect, but I'm still standing here talking to you, so that means something to me that it worked. I basically told Dr. Keating when we first got started, whatever he needed from me I was here for him. Whatever kinds of studies or anything that he wanted to try on me, I was willing to subject myself to them and—because I felt like it was the best way to give back a little bit for what they were doing for me.

Andrew Schorr:

Alan shared his advice for other patients considering being in a clinical trial.

Alan Holtzman:

I think they should pay real strong attention to it, and, you know, do their own little research, find out what all the side effects are, but if they're of the mind to try to contribute something back to society for what the doctors are doing for them, then clinical trials are definitely a great way to do it. Plus, they stand the opportunity of making the disease go away, and I have been disease free now for 7 years of CLL.

Andrew Schorr:

After knocking back CLL and another cancer—merkel cell carcinoma—I asked Alan how he felt about the future.

Alan Holtzman:

Well, you know, I take things one day at a time. My future I guess is tied to the diseases to an extent. But at the end of the day, I don't let the diseases stop me from being—enjoying my life and for being an upbeat kind of person. Coincidentally, my wife and I are leaving this meeting, and we're going diving in the Florida Keys. So nothing slows me down. You know, you take it one day at that time, but you put your trust in doctors, and if the doctors tell you to jump you say, how high?

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