

Managing Cancer Fears: A Spouse's Emotional Journey As a Caregiver

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George Stapleton:

My name is George Stapleton, and I'm lucky enough to be married to Hilde Stapleton.

Well, when I first heard that my wife had cancer, I didn't sleep for the better part of a week, and the way that I dealt with it was to go online and look for trials that were underway for new experimental cancer treatments because the—MD Anderson, as good a hospital as it is, the trials that they had available were all randomized trials where there was a 50/50 chance that my wife would end up receiving a placebo rather than a vaccine or rather than the actual treatment.

And so we really didn't want to risk that. I went online 'til all hours of the morning looking for other treatment approaches that she might benefit from, and we were lucky enough to get her accepted into a vaccine trial at the University of Virginia. And we discussed it with her doctors at MD Anderson, and they agreed that it was a good trial for her.

The biggest resource for me when Hilde was dealing with the cancer was, in fact, Hilde, because she refused to give up. She fought it every day, so we had to be there to support her. She just never would give up. But we had family, we had friends, we had a tremendous support network. But at the end of the day, it all came back to her willingness to deal with the surgeries, the recoveries, the chemotherapies, the treatments. And I won't say she was always a pleasure to be around, but she dealt with it pretty well.

If I were to give any advice to family members dealing, trying to support a family member who has cancer, I would say that you're going to have good and bad days, and you need to make the most of every day that you can. There are resources out—you have to become an advocate for the patient, because when they go in to see the doctor they're focused on just trying to stay alive really. And they don't always hear what the doctor is saying in terms of the treatments that are available or, you know, what their options are.

So what I—I did is I would take notes every time we went into a meeting with one of the doctors and then review those notes with Hilde after the fact, where I could explain it to her again. English is not her first language, so there was that issue to deal with as well when we got into highly technical things on the medical side.

And then the Internet is a tremendous resource to learn about treatment options, to learn about other things that you can do, so we made extensive use of the Internet. There were a number of boards of—for family members of cancer patients where we could share tips on everything from meals to how to deal with certain things to new treatments that were coming down the pike.

People that were in trials would post what was going on with their trials. And so you really have to research the subject to provide the best level of support you can to your patient because they don't have the time to do that themselves. They're too focused on wondering if their—you know, health will improve or not. So by being well informed, we were better able to take it to, if you will, take advantage of what the doctors told us.

We understood what they were talking about. And it took some of the fear out of the situation, because you had a better understanding of what treatments were available and the fact that they were having success with some of those treatments.

And I guess that's—the other thing I would say is that at the end of the day we knew that every day that Hilde could hang on treatments were improving. I was lucky enough to be able to sit down and talk with one of the leading lights, if you will, from MD Anderson years ago, Dr. Mickey LeMaistre, who—his statue is on the third floor as you walk into the main building. And he gave us hope like nobody else could in the sense that he said that cancer will soon one of these days and probably within—maybe not within my lifetime but within my children's lifetime—it will be a disease to be managed and not a death sentence.

So the longer that Hilde could say in the battle the better chance she had for a cure coming down the pike that would improve her odds and give her a better chance of surviving. And they're doing amazing work not only MD Anderson but throughout the cancer space right now with the better understanding of the human genome and what it's done in terms of the development of new cancer treatments.

I would say to any cancer patient, you know, educate yourself as to what treatments are available, discuss them with your doctor. Like Hilde, always be willing to participate in a trial and help advance the science so that other people will benefit from your hardship. And that's something that she's done, she's participated in every trial that MD Anderson has asked her to consider.

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