



*Dedicated to all cancer patients and
their care givers*

The Dream for Life



FAITH | LOVE | HOPE | COURAGE

Message from Dr. V. Shanta

The last 5 decades has witnessed a phenomenal change in the cancer horizon from a period of incurability and fatality to an era of cure and prevention. Despite this, cancer awareness among the general public is extremely limited resulting in unnecessary loss of life. The very word cancer evokes an irrational sense of panic. This needs to be corrected.

Dr. Bapsy, a well known oncologist, through the narration of true life stories brings forth this existing lack of awareness and at the same time dispels these misconceptions about cancer beyond doubt. The messages conveyed are that many cancers are curable if detected early, are preventable by avoiding hazardous habits like tobacco, practice of genital hygiene, the need for annual health check up, not to delay a consultation because of fear of cancer.

Your fear should not be the fear of cancer but the fear of delay.

The narration of stories has been done in a simple day today language, keeping the reader anxiously waiting for the result and ending happily or with a strong message. It will be an interesting recalling to the general public.

This book will be of significant value in our cancer control efforts.

Dr. V. Shanta

Chairperson,
Cancer Institute (WIA),
Adayar, Chennai.

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Foreword

"It was very gratifying to write the foreword for this inspiring book. The book is a collection of incredible stories of courage, about individuals' will to live at a time when survival itself became a challenge and also the many ironies of a journey called Life. I would recommend '**The Dream for Life**' for everyone, not just cancer patients, as to live life well, it is vital to cherish every moment, the good and the unpleasant ones and learn from them.

The stories very poignantly illustrate that miracles are no more than a shift in perception from fearful thoughts to those of love. A brilliant treatise of true stories, they are a ray of hope, a fresh burst of positivity. Dr. Bapsy has beautifully chronicled her patients' unwillingness to accept the grim prognosis, their fight to beat the disease and their lives as survivors, as winners!



Preetha Reddy

Managing Director & Vice Chairman,
Apollo Hospitals Group.

The Dream for Life



Preface

“To have striven, to have made the effort, to have been true to certain ideals – This alone is worth the struggle”.

- *William Osler*

What prompted me to bring about this book of short stories? With an experience of over 3 decades as a medical oncologist, I have seen many patients who have struggled with the disease. Some have emerged victorious and continue to lead a normal life. It is my endeavour to share a few true incidents which I presume will help boost the morale of patients diagnosed with cancer and their care givers. I have made a sincere attempt to allay their fears.

It has never been an easy task when we reveal that a person has been diagnosed with cancer. This very word shatters the patient’s world and their loved ones. It does take time for them to comprehend the situation. But I would always say this to my patients- “All is not lost...Cancer is not always a death sentence”. With rapid strides made in the field of medicine not all cancers are to be dreaded provided it is detected promptly. Some of the cardinal rules which will help treat cancer are :

- a. **Prevention is better than cure – Tobacco in any form is harmful. It is better to do away with tobacco than regret the consequences.**
- b. **Early detection holds the key – Prompt and early detection will go a long way in saving precious lives.**
- c. **Quality of life is much more important. Even in advanced stages of the disease, there are medicines/palliative care to keep the patient comfortable in their last days.**
- d. **Finally, *Never lose hope, have faith, courage and love from your care givers* which will definitely help you to cross hurdles.**

In this book of short stories, I have tried to capture the emotions of patients and how they face the crises. The stories are all true incidents (the names have been changed) which I came across in my career spanning over three decades.



Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Late **Dr. Krishnamoorthy** and **Dr. V. Shanta**, chairperson of Cancer Institute (WIA) Adayar, Chennai who are my mentors in this field.

Dr. V. Shanta has been in this field for over five decades and has dedicated her life to organising care for cancer patients. She is instrumental in reaching out to the poorer sections and has made the treatment affordable. Her work has been widely acknowledged with several awards including the **Magsaysay Award**, and **Padma Shri**.

I would like to thank **Ms. Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw**, Chairperson and Managing Director of Biocon Limited. She pioneered biotechnology and continues to be the driving force in research/innovation in treatment. She is quoted as saying, "Success is about pursuing a vision with a sense of purpose and a spirit of challenge. There are no short cuts to success and there is no substitute for hard work". In recognition of her work she was awarded the **Padma Shri** and **Padma Bhushan**.

I also thank **Ms. Preetha Reddy**, managing director of Apollo Hospitals (Chennai), one of the largest healthcare conglomerates of India, and is one of the pioneer businesswomen of India in the segment of healthcare industry. I am proud to be associated with the Apollo Group.

My heartfelt thanks to **Roche Pharmaceuticals**, who have come forward to publish this book.

Finally, I would like to thank my sister, **Ms. Veni Ravi** who has brought life to the stories. She goaded me into narrating incidents which will be an inspiration to the patients and care givers. She has put in long hours and was instrumental in getting this book published.



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Quality Life

You don't get to choose how you're going to die.
Or when, you can only decide how you're going to live, Now.

- Joan Baez

It was one cold morning in December. Raghuram was unable to sleep. He was tossing and turning in his bed. He was 50 years old and an officer with the Indian Foreign Service. The designation came along with huge responsibilities in India and abroad. He was trying to mentally chalk out his schedule for the day.

Somehow he felt a little queasy today. He just could not point a finger and say what was nagging him. But he knew that everything was not perfect. That much was for sure.

He pulled himself up and went to the bathroom. His bladder was full and he had the urge to urinate. As he tried, he realized that he was having difficulty in passing urine and had vague body pains too.

His wife, Anuradha was in the kitchen making coffee. His daughter Sharmila was still fast asleep as she had a late night preparing for her exams. Wondering what took so long, Anuradha called out to her husband. She was shocked to see sweat beads on his forehead and a worried look on his face. Sensing that all was not well, she asked him "What happened Raghu? Why are looking so upset? Is anything wrong?" Raghuram did not want to



alarm her. "Nothing....I am just feeling a little uneasy. Maybe I have caught the flu" he said.

Anu gave him some coffee and made him relax. His daughter also joined them at the table and asked "Dad... Why are you looking so worried?"

Raghuram's mind traveled 8 years back. He then said "Look, Anu and Sharmi do not get agitated... But I think I have some problems urinating. Remember, earlier I was treated for cancer of the prostate... I am wondering whether it could be related to that". Anu reassured Raghuram "Don't worry... Let us not assume things. I will fix up an appointment with the doctor".

The next day, they had sought an appointment with me. I examined him and upon evaluation noticed the disease in the same area. I called the entire family consisting of the wife, the daughter and the patient for counselling. Being very well educated and also on account of their previous experience, they could relate to the problems immediately.

The discussion was about the course of treatment, the therapies available at this stage and also the outcome of chemotherapy. The patient's cure was out of question, which was also explained to them.

Mr. Raghuram said "Whatever be it... even if I have only a few years to live, let me have some quality life". The wife



and daughter struggled to come to terms but had no other option. Tears welled up in their eyes. But they also knew that their loved one needed quality life.

So, they opted for treatment and with an iron will decided to face the consequences. As days passed by, Raghuram started responding very well to the treatment. Once the treatment was over, Raghuram had to travel abroad on official assignment. The patient met me and asked whether he is fit enough to travel abroad to the USA and Canada. I said "Why not?" A smile lit up their faces. The entire family packed their bag and off they went to the USA and then to Canada.

While returning, they spent some time in the UK. Raghuram being an ardent tennis fan especially of Roger Federer. He was all set to watch the Wimbledon men's singles finals. It was happy times again for the family and it was one joyous moment seeing Roger Federer win the Wimbledon title. Raghuram was simply jumping with joy. They were so happy that they totally forgot about the dreaded disease.

Now, it was destiny's turn to smile... Yes. They were all returning to India and so was the disease... This time, with a vengeance.

Again they met me. The patient said "Doctor, I am unable to bear the pain... It's excruciating... Could you please do



something to alleviate the pain and maybe control the symptoms? The patient had no alternative but to undergo diversion surgery for urine and motion control. Unable to see Raghuram suffering, Anuradha and Sharmila came to me. They asked "Doctor, is there any way to mitigate his suffering? What about euthanasia? It is unbearable to see him undergo this ordeal" they wept. They could barely talk...Their voices were choked with emotion and understandably so. Seeing a loved one suffer is not easy... Sometimes even death would be a better option. They asked me "Is it possible to relieve him of his suffering once and for all?" In simple terms they went to the extent of suggesting mercy killing. Imagine what could have driven them to seek this end? It is never easy to watch a loved one suffer day and night.

Sensing it was an emotional outburst, I patiently explained to them that the law does not permit mercy killing. We have to make do with morphine and fentanyl patches which will give some relief from pain. There is nothing anybody can do but only to await death which will take its own course.

Such is the irony of fate!!



Will Power – the Elixir of Life

Patience and perseverance have a magical effect before which difficulties disappear and obstacles vanish.

-John Quincy Adams

Saraswathy woke up as usual at 5.30 a.m. to attend to her daily household chores. She had to get breakfast and lunch ready for her husband Kumar and daughter Shailaja, who was working in a bank. She would relax only after both of them had left for their work. Till such time she had hardly anytime even to breathe! Typical in most households!!

While she was totally absorbed in her domestic chores, she had no time to give a thought about anything else. Her daughter, Shailaja would always think how selfless was her mother and was planning a suitable gift on 'Mother's Day'. An advertisement for a "Complete health checkup for Women" caught her attention. She immediately thought what better way to keep her mother healthy!

On 'Mother's Day' she greeted her mother and said "amma this Mother's Day I want you to undergo a complete health check up and this is my gift to you". Her mother rebuked her and said "Why are you wasting your money and time? I am fine and fit...What is the necessity now for a health check?" As Shailaja could not convince her mother, she called up her brother Arun who was in the



USA. He also compelled his mother who was 50 years old and said that it would be helpful to get a routine health check up done as there were plans of her visiting the USA.

As she could not protest further, Saraswathy agreed half-heartedly. She completed all the tests. Her X-rays showed some problem and she was advised to consult an Oncologist. With fear largely written on their faces, they sought the advice of their family physician, who referred them to me.

Saraswathy and Kumar met me the following day and I noticed that she had lung cancer that had metastasized to the brain. Both, the husband and wife were devastated. They kept saying..."There were absolutely no symptoms... but how could it be..." I then patiently explained the present status of the disease and told them that at this stage there was no cure as the disease had already spread. The only avenue of treatment available to them was Chemotherapy/Radiation therapy.

Saraswathy realized that time was running out and she had certain duties to perform. The first and foremost thing that came to her mind was to see her daughter get married and settled. As luck would have it, a good alliance clicked and they decided to celebrate the marriage a year later.

In the meanwhile, Saraswathy underwent CT/RT. She was responding fairly well to the treatment and a year later



celebrated her daughter's wedding. With happiness brimming, she decided to visit both her son and daughter (who also migrated to the USA) to celebrate her daughter's 'Thalai Deepavali' (the first deepavali after marriage celebrated at the bride's parental home). With sheer grit, Saraswathy and Kumar left for the US. She wanted to make the most of her life when she could!! They visited both their son and daughter and she enjoyed every moment. Those were joyous moments for the entire family.

As the old adage goes, all good things come to an end... so also the time came for Saraswathy and Kumar to take leave of their children. It was such an emotional farewell to them. Both Shailaja and Arun came to see them off. With anguish they wondered whether there will be a next time...

Saraswathy and Kumar knew that they had to return as the disease was also progressing. But she came back with another goal!! This time she wanted to see her son get married!!

She knew she was living on borrowed time... But what? Where there is a will there is a way isn't it? She never lost hope... and that helped her survive the worst moments. Her husband was also very supportive.

Upon their return to India, both Saraswathy and Kumar met me to find out about further course of treatment.



I suggested an intensive chemotherapy protocol which she had to undergo with no hopes of cure. All the pain she was enduring was to get some more time in the fond hope of realizing her last wish to get her son married.

The natural history of survival for patients diagnosed with metastasized lung cancer is just a few months. But Saraswathy defied science. With her iron will and her ambition to see her son married she continued her battle with cancer...She is still going strong at the end of 3 years!! Everything depends on the will power and the wish to survive.

Miracles do happen...Don't they?



The Blame Game

You will find peace not by trying to escape your problems, but by confronting them courageously. You will find peace not in denial, but in victory.

-J. Donald Walters

Mumtaz, a 26 year old dentist was just married - only 2 months ago to a software engineer, Anwar aged 29 years. The marriage celebrations had slowly wound up and the newlyweds had resumed their daily routine.

Anwar was always complaining of improper bowel movements. Sometimes it was diarrhea or the other extreme - constipation. Anwar was blaming it on the rich and spicy food that they were having continuously since their wedding. Mumtaz was worried and asked "What is wrong Anwar? Do you always have these problems? What is the point in just swallowing tablets every now and then?" Anwar just brushed it aside saying that it is nothing out of ordinary and it would happen once in a while. "What is there to worry? There is something wrong with the food or maybe water I had today. This is just normal and happens when there is some sort of contamination" he said.

As the incidence was quite frequent and not satisfied with her husband's explanation, she consulted their family physician. He examined Anwar and advised that it would be better to get a colonoscopy done. When they reached home, Anwar was skeptical and said "What is the



necessity for me to undergo this test? It's waste of time and money? Nowadays it has become a fashion to prescribe various tests even for simple maladies!" This time Mumtaz would not listen to him. She said "Let us get this done. If there is nothing wrong then we can feel relieved and take treatment accordingly". After much persuasion, Anwar agreed to the test reluctantly.

Mumtaz's doubts were not unfounded. There was small rectal growth. Early detection! She immediately contacted her family physician who suggested that they get the opinion of an oncologist. Upon hearing this, Anwar threw a fit and asked sarcastically "What is the necessity to see an oncologist? Do you think I have cancer?" Anwar simply refused to believe that there could be anything seriously wrong with him. He attributed the symptoms to polluted water. He said "Mumtaz, you are making a mountain of a mole hill"! To make matters worse, Anwar's father echoed the same sentiments and he went one step further – he blamed Mumtaz for all the problems. He said "You have no time to provide nutritious and hygienic food for my son. The result is he is suffering now. All because your career is more important to you than my son's well-being" he stormed. "He does not require any treatment, all he needs is good food" he said.

Mumtaz was already on the verge of tears, trying to convince her husband to see an oncologist. Now his father was not making the situation any easier. After



much cajoling and pleading, Anwar finally consented to see an oncologist. She said “let the oncologist decide whether you require any treatment. Let us not make any decisions”.

The following week both Anwar and Mumtaz met me with their reports. Anwar refused to believe that anything could be wrong with him. He said, “Doctor, there is absolutely nothing wrong... This is only due to contaminated water and having food in the eateries.... Mumtaz is over reacting”. To add fuel to fire, Anwar’s father was also not willing to hear that his son had anything to do with cancer and warned him not to undergo any treatment.

I listened to them patiently and counseled Anwar. I spoke to him about the growth and the biopsy which confirmed that the growth was cancerous. I told him that it is imperative that he undergoes surgery, Chemotherapy and Radiation therapy. Still dazed, he refused to believe that this was happening to him. He was in denial. Mumtaz was also in tears. I told them to think about it and get back to me. The strong denial made them to delay the decision. A year later he came back to the clinic with more symptoms.

Another software engineer, Sailesh had come for his periodical review. While waiting to see me, he had a casual conversation with Anwar. He also counseled Anwar



and said that “I also had the same problem I underwent surgery and I have just completed Chemo/Radiation therapy”. He narrated his experience and advised him not to waste further time and to start the treatment immediately.

Finally, Anwar agreed and underwent surgery. He was found to have the disease in an advanced stage, which meant that the problems could have persisted for a longer duration than 2 months that he mentioned in history. I decided to probe further and asked him his past history. He then confided that he had such incidence of altered bowel habits even during his college days which were more than 5 years ago!! On further questioning, he revealed that his mother had the same problems and had succumbed to a similar illness. If he had gone for early detection, it would have been detected early and complete cure was possible with less invasive treatment.

I reiterated to both the patient and his father that his disease was not due to contaminated water or not having nutritious food! This was much more than that. Though the symptoms had recurred 2 months ago, Anwar had been harboring the disease for a much longer time. Being young, just 29-years-old, this could be even genetic.

The minute I finished explaining the circumstances, both Anwar and his father realized the danger and agreed to undergo necessary treatment.



FAITH | LOVE | HOPE | COURAGE

It is tough for one to face and accept that the disease has struck them especially when they are young. But proper investigations and prompt treatment could save the patient's life and also the family from mental agony.



Negligence – a Costly Price to Pay

"If you look away from something you're supposed to be looking for, that's called willful blindness, ... and willful blindness is one aspect of determining the negligence."

-Michael Shapiro

Dr. Sushila had a restless night. She has been having a disturbed sleep for quite some time on account of her cough. The cough would not abate and had been lasting for over a year. Being a doctor herself, she tried various medications but the cough refused to subside. As she was very busy at the hospital, she never had the time to attach any importance and was now and then treating it symptomatically. Her husband, Raghavan asked her "What happened? This cough has been persisting for quite some time and you have not really bothered to look into it?" "You are not taking proper care of your health" he chided her. She said, "Nothing serious, don't worry. My mind is preoccupied with that conference...I have to reschedule my appointments if I have to go abroad for that conference". She was more worried about making necessary arrangements for the conference than to check her health condition. Dr. Sushila is not alone...Most of us tend to neglect our health until something bothers us to an extent that we cannot afford to ignore!

She had applied for a visa when she was invited for the conference. As an X-ray was a prerequisite for the visa, she took an X-ray and was shocked to see that all was not well with her lungs. "For whatever it is worth... she



thought, let me consult an oncologist". Along with her X-ray, she met me the following day. I had advised her to undergo further tests/examination and diagnosed that she had lung cancer which had already spread to the brain. She was barely 50 years old, but the disease was in an advanced stage.

I called both Dr. Sushila and her husband for counseling. I explained the nature of the disease and that it was already in an advanced stage. I was left with no alternative but to tell them that it was beyond cure. Upon hearing this, they were shell shocked and felt that their world was falling apart. I also reproached them for not even taking an X-ray which was a basic investigation for a cough that was persistent for over a year. Being a doctor, she was also well aware of the repercussions.

This was not the time to give them false hopes. I was forced to tell them that Chemotherapy and Radiotherapy could be administered and that if the tumor responds, she might have an extension of life. It was by no means an easy task for them to come to terms.

Sushila and Raghavan returned home. She was unable to digest what she had just heard. She said "Raghavan, I don't think I have cancer. I am not happy with the diagnosis. There is something wrong". She refused to believe that she had cancer. So, they decided to get opinion from another oncologist. They kept on visiting



other oncologists hoping that there would be a mistake in the diagnosis, despite the biopsy proving that it was cancer. They still refused to accept that she had the disease!!

Much time had been wasted and still she was contemplating on alternate medicine/therapies. One of her family friends suggested that it would be a great idea to go in for alternate medicine as it may not have much side-effects. There were quite a few advertisements claiming complete cure of cancer be it at any stage!! She was motivated to try this therapy as it offered cure. Though she was a medical practitioner herself, she did not for a moment apply her mind. There is an old adage that states 'So long as there are people who are willing to get cheated, it will be a cheaters world'!

So, off they went to see the therapist who claimed that his treatment would fully eradicate the disease! His talk was so convincing – he was telling them what they would love to hear in these circumstances!! Dr. Sushila was no exception- she succumbed to his pep talk and agreed to try out his therapy.

Two months elapsed... There was no improvement. Worse... Dr. Sushila threw convulsions and was brought to the Emergency care at the hospital. Now, they literally begged us to start the treatment... to do something to save her life.



I called her spouse, Mr. Raghavan and counseled him about the outcome of the treatment. He still refused to accept that his wife had terminal disease and was not fit for any specific therapy. It is sad but true that things had gone out of hand. I further informed him that now his wife requires symptom control... so that she can have a quality end and by no means a quality life.

It would not be out of place to mention that in this case, both the patient and her husband were very well educated but did not as much take an X-ray for a cough that was persisting for over a year which is sheer negligence. Secondly, they refused to accept that she had cancer, that too at an advanced stage. Early detection and timely treatment can prevent to a certain extent all this agony!!



Try, Try Again...Never Ever Give Up

Health, happiness and success depend upon the fighting spirit of each person. The big thing is not what happens to us in life - but what we do about what happens to us.

-George Allen

Hari and Savithri were a young couple. Two years rolled by and yet Savithri did not conceive. She had seen her gynaecologist who assured her that there was nothing wrong with her and that she would definitely conceive. Another year had gone by and Savithri finally conceived and gave birth to a son and named him Sathish. Her joy knew no bounds as Sathish grew up and started schooling too!! He was like any other normal child until he was about 4 years old when he was frequently falling sick. The visits to the doctor and various tests showed that he was in serious trouble.

Hari started having arguments with his wife and kept shouting at her as medical expenses started climbing. He screamed at her "You have no other work? Even for a small ailment you are rushing to the doctor. You act as though your son came straight from heaven! You are wasting money on the doctors and tests"... On the other hand, he started drinking heavily. Savithri retorted, "Why are you grumbling? I am doing this to save our only child. Satish was born to us after a long time. Can you not be more considerate? You have started spending money on alcohol... Of what earthly use is it?" she cried. Hari was angered by her comments and just stopped short of



hitting her. Poor Savithri... she had nobody to turn to. With tears streaming down her face, she carried Satish to the doctor; little knowing that worse news was in store for her.

The doctor told her that he suspected that Satish had cancer and diagnosed him with acute leukemia. Savithri's bottled up emotions burst in the form of tears. She was devastated. The doctor advised her not to waste any more time and that she should immediately consult an oncologist for further course of treatment.

Savithri then brought the child to me with all the test and reports. She was aghast when I confirmed that the child had acute leukemia. I told her to bring her husband along the next day, so that I could explain to them the course of treatment and a rough estimate of expenses that are likely to be incurred. The chances of cure with childhood Leukemia was high.

She returned home and told Hari of the diagnosis. He callously remarked, "Oh! It is cancer... it cannot be cured... we will be only wasting money and time on the child". Savithri pleaded "Please come to the doctor... let her decide what best could be done". She was wondering "How can this man - father of his child behave like this?"

Both Hari and Savithri met me the following day. The mother was pleading with me to do all possible things to save the child. The father was indignant and was not keen



to spend money on the child. He categorically stated “Doctor, I know leukemia is deadly and cannot be cured. What is the point in treating him when it is not likely to work?” Further, he added, Satish may not live long enough and for such a short life, is it worth spending money?

I was simply taken aback by this man’s harsh words and that too on the only son who was blessed to them after a long time! He made up his mind and said “I am not prepared to spend money for the treatment”. Savithri was overwhelmed in grief. On one hand, her only precious child was battling with cancer and on the other, her ruthless husband. She was reduced to tears and was groping in the dark as to how to proceed further. Savithri, then pleaded with her father to help her at this juncture. Finally, her father relented and came forward to bear the cost of the treatment – after all it was his grandson!

The child was admitted in the hospital and the treatment commenced. The child started showing some improvement. As the treatment for leukemia was long drawn, the child had to come for check up every month and take medicines regularly. At the end of 2 years, Sathish responded remarkably well to the treatment. He was completely cured of the disease!

After 5 years, I saw the young lad and his mother waiting in the Out Patient Department to see me. Recognizing



that it was Savithri and Sathish, I enquired about the health of the little boy now a grown up teen. Savithri told me that he was doing fine. Noticing her forehead which did not bear a 'bindi', I asked her what the matter was. She told me that Hari – Sathish's father had died in an alcoholic brawl. This is destiny... I thought.

As I walked back to my room, I recalled the father's words when he first met me. "Why should I waste my money on a boy who has not long to live?" Today the voice that uttered these words is 'No more'... such is the irony of fate... No one can predict anybody's death. It will happen when it is destined to happen...

After 15 years, I saw a young man waiting outside my room to see me. I could not recognize him. When he introduced himself as Sathish whom I had treated for leukemia as a child, I felt very happy to see him blossomed into a young man. A smile lit up my face and I asked him what he was doing now. He said he finished his graduation and that too in flying colors and had been offered a decent job in a leading IT company!!

This left me wondering... What if the mother had not pursued the treatment? Would she have not lost her precious child? How happy and contented the mother must have felt to see her son rise to this level...



Cancer has Cures!

Expect to have hope rekindled. Expect your prayers to be answered in wondrous ways. The dry seasons in life do not last.

The spring rains will come again.

-Sarah Ban Breathnach

It was one Saturday evening. I had finished my hospital work and then decided to do some shopping as I had to leave the following week to the U.S to attend a conference. As I was busy shopping, I had a feeling that someone was observing me. A young girl and a lady presumably her mother, were watching me from a distance. I had a feeling that I had met these people somewhere but could not recollect immediately. They were discussing amongst themselves and the older lady walked forward towards me and called "Doctor... Doctor". I turned back wondering why this lady called me. I did not seem to know them.

Then both the young girl and the lady came and asked me "Doctor, don't you recognize us?" I tried my best to recollect but I just could not place them. I told them "I am sorry, but I just can't remember you". The older lady introduced herself as Parvathy and the young girl her daughter Preethi. Parvathy continued "Doctor, 10 years ago, I came to the hospital with Preethi who was diagnosed with leukemia."

My thoughts rewound to the past. Now, I could recall Parvathy waiting with her daughter worry written largely



on her face, not seeming to know what the future held for her daughter who was just 10 years old.

When I examined the child and confirmed that she had leukemia, Parvathy simply broke down. The child not knowing why the mother was weeping profusely got frightened and hugged her mother fiercely.

I counseled Parvathy "Don't worry... All is not lost... You have come at the right time, I am sure that if proper treatment is given, we can definitely save the child". Though she looked reassured, she was not fully convinced. Whenever, people are diagnosed with cancer their immediate reaction is to think of the extreme-Death! I told her "Not all cancers lead to death... Some are curable... Please have faith. Only if you have faith in what you do, you can succeed..." I told her to see me the following week to start the course of treatment.

Parvathy came the following week with Preethi. I told them "The treatment will take time... Do not expect miracles to happen... I am confident that she will definitely improve over a period of time... Don't lose heart. The most important thing is to complete the treatment as per schedule..." She agreed and the treatment commenced. Preethi started responding very well to the treatment and after about 3 years, she was completely cured! Preethi like other children of her age, was able to lead a normal life...



I woke up from my reverie.... Parvathy, tears welling in her eyes told me "This is the Preethi, you treated Doctor". I looked at Preethi. She had blossomed into a very pretty lady. Parvathy, added, smilingly, "Doctor, guess what we are shopping for?" Preethi was blushing. We have come to shop for her wedding sarees! I felt so happy for them. Parvathy continued, "Doctor, more than anything else, we require your presence at the wedding to bless her". I told her that I will definitely come. Preethi thanked me and said, "Doctor, but for you I would not be alive today". I told her "Life or death is not in our hands. We only treat the patients... everything else is controlled by the Supreme Power".

I bid them goodbye and I was also feeling satisfied to see the girl who 10 years ago was suffering from the dreaded disease but now had been completely cured! Preethi was brought at the right time for treatment and took treatment as per schedule without breaking the regimen and was cured of the disease. Today she is like any other normal girl. A second chance to live... I thought. Perseverance paid!



Will to Survive

Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear.

-Ambrose Redmoon

Mr. Venkataraman, a Professor of physics in a reputed college sought an appointment with me. When I enquired what it was about, he did not reveal much but insisted upon seeing me in person. As I sensed something was wrong, I told him to come the very next day.

Mr. Venkataraman was about 50 years old. He came along with a bunch of reports and said that he was directed by his family physician that he see an oncologist immediately as he suspected that the Professor had lung cancer. I gave a patient hearing and examined the reports of the tests conducted and had to tell him the inevitable. It is a very difficult situation but nonetheless I had to tell him the truth. I said "Professor... I am sorry to tell you this... but your doctor's concern is true - You have advanced stage of lung cancer..." He was shocked and was at a loss of words. Finally, collecting himself, he asked "Doctor, please do something... how much time do I have?... I need to live at least for one year... I am doing my Ph. D and I am in the final phase... My work is almost complete....Please Doctor, is there any way you can help me out?" A volley of questions came hurtling out. I told the Professor to first relax. I added, "There is no need for you to get alarmed. Yes... there are drugs... but if you do



respond to the treatment, we can keep the disease at bay at least for sometime... I warn you that the therapy will be intensive and you will have to put up with adverse side-effects". The Professor smiled and said, "Whatever it takes to complete my thesis, I am prepared to face it". I told him to get admitted the following week without wasting time.

The treatment commenced. I was amazed to see so many students visiting the Professor and offering financial assistance and also donated blood. The Professor must have been a very good teacher too!

With the blessings of the Almighty, and the will power to finish the task he had undertaken, Professor Venkataraman showed improvement. Even during Chemotherapy, he was busy dictating notes to his students. This man had real grit... I thought.

His line of treatment came to an end and so did his work! He completed his thesis right in time. His work was acclaimed as one of the best in his field and he was awarded the Doctorate with a gold medal which he was to receive in Tokyo! Professor Venkataraman made a trip to Tokyo to receive the medal too! Not only that, he was able to submit two more papers!

Professor Venkataraman had asked for a year but he was blessed with 3 years. The disease started raising its ugly head, this time with full vengeance. He told me "Doctor,



I think I am done... I had asked for a year of life but fortunately I could survive this ordeal for 3 years! I don't think I can ask for more... I know that this time there is no escape from the clutches of death..." He continued "Well Doctor, now I am mentally prepared to face any eventuality". I was moved by his words but I also knew that one has to accept reality. The second line of therapy failed and the Professor succumbed to the disease.

I wondered, what kept this man going? His passion for his work that he must not exit from this world leaving his work unfinished... I thought the therapy/medicines worked even better because the man had a will to survive!



Last Wish

It's only when we truly know and understand that we have a limited time on earth - and that we have no way of knowing when our time is up - that we will begin to live each day to the fullest, as if it was the only one we had.

-Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

Abraham was feeling queasy that Saturday morning. He was 70 years old and was already diagnosed with advanced gastric cancer. He sensed that everything was not alright and that he was nearing his end. But he had one more duty to perform... he thought. His daughter, Shirley's wedding. He was not prepared to exit from this world before seeing his daughter married! He decided to have a consultation and sought an appointment with me on Monday. Sensing the urgency in his voice, I agreed to see him immediately.

Mr. Abraham came the next morning. After examining him, I told him that his health was deteriorating. He then told me, "Doctor, I need to survive at least for 2 months... I have a wish to be fulfilled... I want to see my daughter, Shirley married!" He continued "She is at present in the U.S and it will take at least a couple of months to finalize her wedding!"

Shirley, Mr. Abraham's daughter had a long conversation with me and I told her that the disease was indeed progressing. She was very upset and I told her, 'Listen Shirley, your Dad is running out of time... he has only one wish now... he wants to finalize your wedding... I am afraid



he may not have much time left". Shirley immediately agreed and they had made necessary arrangements and the wedding was to take place 2 months later.

Mr. Abraham felt elated..."Everything seems to fall in place for me" he thought. His happiness was short lived. All of a sudden his health took a turn for the worse. I immediately called the family and advised them "Look, I think your father may not survive for another month... he is already on life support... maybe we can expect him to live for a few day". This was a bolt from the blue. They were shocked to see their loved one in this state. That with only a month to go for his daughter's wedding!

As there was no time to waste, the family decided to hasten the wedding celebrations. They had a discussion with the bridegroom and his family. They also understood the gravity of the situation.

So, they finally agreed to have the wedding at a Church in an old age home. Here the Church's Choir consisted of old people! Nevertheless there was no dearth of the festive atmosphere!

My patient, his eyes brimming with tears sat in a wheelchair and witnessed the entire ceremony. He gave his daughter away to the background music provided by the inmates of the old age home! It was a simple ceremony but everyone present were moved to tears!



Mr. Abraham was choked with emotion. He said, “Doctor, my last wish has been fulfilled. I have seen my daughter’s wedding. What more can I ask for... I am content that the Lord has allowed me to witness this one occasion” he smiled. He seemed to be at peace. As his health started deteriorating, I again admitted him in the hospital.

To everyone’s surprise, Mr. Abraham started improving dramatically! The family held a discussion and they wondered “Why not conduct the marriage on the date decided earlier in a grand manner as scheduled?” This made Mr. Abraham literally jump with joy. He exclaimed, “Wonderful idea! Let us proceed.”

So, the marriage was performed much to the delight of all the family members in a grand manner as planned earlier.

Mr. Abraham lived for a year after that and then passed away peacefully.

Such is the benevolence of God. No one can decide anybody’s death... Sometimes, Destiny defies Science... I pondered. Cancer treatment is holistic; everybody cannot be cured, especially advanced cancer. In such circumstances the good quality of life till end plays the major role.



Unconditional Love

It is not flesh and blood but the heart which makes us
fathers and sons.

-Johann Schiller

Mr. Prabhakar, a retired engineer was about 60 years old. He had been ailing for some time and after conducting a few tests, their family physician suggested that they consult an oncologist. His son, Mr. Subash was an IAS officer. Mr. Prabhakar was worried and knew that something was seriously wrong. However, he did not want to alarm his son and get him worried too. Already, he was aware that Subash was preoccupied with his work and barely had time to attend to his daily chores.

In the meantime, Mr. Subash booked an appointment with me the next day after seeking the opinion of their family physician. Both father and son met me at the hospital. After seeing the test reports, I started discussing the prognosis, the course of treatment and its outcome. All of a sudden, Subash said "Doctor, sorry for interrupting you. Could you please give us a minute?" He made me stop the discussion abruptly. He excused himself and took his father outside and advised him to wait in the lobby.

I was wondering what went wrong and Subash came inside the consultation room. He profusely apologized for his behaviour and said, "Doctor, I am really sorry for interrupting you. I had no other way but to stop the



conversation abruptly". He continued, "Doctor, my father is not aware of the fact that he has advanced prostate cancer... I didn't want him to know. That is the reason why I made him wait outside". I told him, "Mr. Subash, I appreciate your concern. How can I explain the treatment to your father without telling him the nature of the disease? Do you think it is fair to just start the treatment without explaining the pros and cons, especially to an educated person like your father?" He then begged me to put it mildly, say that he is "suspected to have prostate cancer'. I was reluctant. But he insisted that we can gradually explain to his father because saying now that he had prostate cancer that too in advanced state might come as a rude shock to him.

Mr. Subash went out and brought his father, Mr. Prabhakar inside the room. Mr. Prabhakar said, "Subash, I would like to have a word with the Doctor in private. Would you mind waiting outside?" Mr. Prabhakar, alone came inside. "Doctor, you must be wondering, why all this drama? With your hectic schedule and time constraints, I understand you must be a little annoyed. I have a small request... Please Doctor, he continued, "I request you not to reveal that I have advanced cancer of the prostate to my son. Subash, is highly emotional. He will not be able to digest the fact. I do not want to see him as an emotional wreck... As it is he has a lot of work pressure... I would not like to burden him with my health problems. I have lived my life. Why disturb my son?"



I was taken aback. I did not know whether to laugh or cry. Both the father and son were highly concerned about each other. The son wanted to protect his father and the father on the other hand, the son! I really admired this father-son bonding.

When nuclear families and old age homes have become the order of the day, I admired this love and bonding between the parent and the child. All is not lost, I thought.



The Power of Love

Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.

-Maya Angelou

Rahul was employed in one of the leading corporate companies. He was barely 25 years old and was 'raring to go' like any individual of his age. He was basically a happy person and he considered himself lucky to land in a plum job soon after his post-graduation.

He thought "What more can I ask for?" Like many of the youngsters he had dreams of his own and was planning his future with great enthusiasm.

There is a saying that all good things come to an end and Rahul was no exception. Being a meticulous planner, he had opted for an insurance scheme which required certain medical tests. So, Rahul had undergone the tests and his report revealed that he had certain problems which had to be attended immediately. He was advised to consult a medical oncologist without further delay.

Rahul sought an appointment with me the very next day. He brought a file and took out a report and placed it on my table. Without batting an eyelid, he asked me a blunt question "Doctor, How long I get to live?" I was taken aback but I said "That is one question no one can answer"- I sounded a bit philosophical.



Rahul was silent for a moment and then continued "Doctor, I went for a medical checkup for taking insurance. The blood tests, I was told, revealed that I had chronic myeloid leukemia. This is the reason for my earlier question" he quipped. Rahul also confirmed that he had no symptoms whatsoever and it is only through a routine blood test he came to know of the disease.

I told him, "Rahul please do not jump into conclusions. We will have to do some more tests and then we shall decide the course of the treatment". After the tests, it was confirmed that Rahul did have chronic myeloid leukemia. I started the treatment.

After about a month of commencement of the treatment, a young lady was waiting in my OPD to see me. She was in fact waiting for quite some time till the hustle and the bustle of the OPD subsided.

When she met me, she introduced herself as Sunitha and asked me whether I had seen a patient named Rahul. I said "Yes, but what is this got to do with you?" She then told "Doctor, could you please tell me what is wrong with him? Is he undergoing any treatment here? Can you tell me the diagnosis?" I immediately asked her, "Are you related to Rahul?" She hesitated for a minute and then said "Doctor, I am his girl friend and for the past one month he has been purposely avoiding me. He never answered my phone calls. I was getting agitated.



Yesterday, I saw him come out of the hospital. That is why I came here. I really want to know what is ailing him”

I politely told her, “Look Sunitha, I cannot discuss a patient’s history without his consent... It is against medical ethics. I can help you only if you come along with Rahul. I suppose you will understand”. She was filled with remorse. But I could do nothing to assuage her feelings.

Two weeks later, Rahul and Sunitha came to my OPD. I discussed with both of them about the nature of the disease. I told them, “I hate to say this, but nevertheless I have to tell you the truth. This disease cannot be cured. But one thing, we can definitely prolong life.” There was silence in the room. Sunitha struggled to come to terms with the fatality of the situation.

Rahul broke the silence. He told Sunitha, “It is madness to have any relationship at this juncture. I am no longer interested in you. Please leave me alone and you get along with your life”. He abruptly got up and left the room.

Sunitha accompanied him and after he had left, came back inside. She told me “Doctor, I can understand his feelings. But at any cost, nothing is going to stop me from getting married to him. What if he was diagnosed with the disease soon after our marriage? Will I just forsake him? Whatever time God bestows on us, we will live



together. I am prepared to face any ordeal". I was awe struck by this girl's determination. Even knowing well the predicament, she firmly decided to go ahead. For her, happiness was in uniting with Rahul. Maybe that was the power of love!

Rahul and Sunitha spoke at length and arrived at a decision. They decided not to inform their parents about this diagnosis. They got the consent of their parents and finally united in wedlock.

Rahul lived for a period of 10 years after which he lost the battle and succumbed to the disease. There are people like Rahul and Sunitha in this world. Despite knowing the fact that he had little time to live, Sunitha wanted to spend it with him. I admired their will power and the strong fight they put up against the disease.



The Devoted Son

My mother was the most beautiful woman I ever saw.
All I am I owe to my mother.
I attribute all my success in life to the moral, intellectual
and physical education I received from her.
-George Washington

Shekar was working in a reputed IT company in the US. He was only 35 years old and was settled in the U.S for the last 10 years. His wife Aparna, was also a IT professional employed in the U.S. Theirs was a small family with two children – what one would term as an ideal family.

Shekar was the only child of Vasantha, who had brought up her son showering all the love and affection that most mothers having a single child do! She doted on him and was happy for him that he was well settled. On her son's persistence she was visiting the U.S on and off. But after sometime she felt the journey tedious and slowly avoided traveling to the U.S. Her son and his family would visit her once in two years as they were also tied down with their work. Shekar was always worried about his mother staying all alone in India. He pleaded with her to join them in the U.S. Vasantha refused saying that her roots were here and it would not be possible for her to relocate to the U.S at this age.

As destiny would have it, Vasantha fell sick. She was diagnosed with multiple myeloma. She had been having the symptoms for several months but did not divulge it.



She was worried that she would be unnecessarily troubling her son. She had a caretaker as she became bedridden. When she started developing bed sores, the caretaker quietly informed her son, Shekar about the health of his mother.

Shekar immediately came rushing to India leaving behind his family and his coveted job to be with his mother. He was shocked to see his mother in such a state. He could not digest the fact that his mother had become very sick and knew that he was losing her. He decided to consult an oncologist and was referred to me. He brought his mother to the hospital. Vasantha looked very frail and as she was bedridden, the bed sores also took a toll. She was also wetting the bed which further aggravated the situation.

After I had examined her, Shekar asked me, "Doctor, what type of treatment could be given? Is there any way I can save her? Whatever be the cost I am prepared to bear it... I want the best possible treatment". I told him, "Mr. Shekar, I understand your anguish. But there is very little we can do now... She is not fit for any specific therapy. But we can alleviate her suffering by putting her on pain relief measures and other supportive medicines". Shekar, exclaimed "My God! I am to blame for this situation. I was not with her when she needed me most." His voice choked. I told him "Please be calm. There is nothing that anyone can do. At least let us relieve her of pain in her final



days". Shekar then asked me, "How long do I have to stay here?" I answered, "I cannot give a definite duration. It may take a long time..."

In the next four months, her condition deteriorated. Shekar was at her side all the time. He took meticulous care and looked after her very well. At no point did he exhibit any distaste to do the nursing. He tended to her daily needs - gave her a bed bath, dressed her and took care of her toilet needs too! Not once did he feel frustrated! I was amazed at his devotion. Out of curiosity I asked him, "Shekar, how long do you intend to stay here, leaving your job and family?" He said, "I will be there till her last breath. At least I am able to perform my duties now..." he wept. His wife, Aparna was very supportive and abided his decision.

Vasantha was always praying that she should meet her end soon. She felt that she was a burden to her son. During one of my visits she was weeping and told me "Doctor, I am ruining my son's life. Why can't God take me away soon? Why should I trouble him?" I counseled her, "Mrs.Vasantha, instead of weeping like this you should be proud of bearing such a noble son. Spend your time happily with him and make it memorable for him too!" Shekar who was listening to this conversation came and joined. He said "Amma, you are not disturbing my life. I know how much you struggled to raise me. Today I am in this position only because of you. I owe everything to



you...This is my turn and allow me to perform my duty. Please do not nurse such thoughts. It is only the sheer love and affection that you showered on me that makes me of some assistance to you. Your love was pure without anticipating anything in return. I want to be with you. Please be cheerful”.

I took leave from both of them. I was just wondering that in this century when most of them are selfish and put their requirements ahead of everything, this son was so devoted despite being separated from his mother for the last 10 years. It was a wonderful feeling, though rare these days!

I was reminded of Anne Taylor’s words

***“Who ran to help me when I fell,
And would have some pretty story to tell,
Or kiss the place to make it well?
My MOTHER”.***



All is Well That Ends Well

Courage, it would seem, is nothing less than the power to overcome danger, misfortune, fear, injustice, while continuing to affirm inwardly that life with all its sorrows is good; that everything is meaningful even if in a sense beyond our understanding; and that there is always tomorrow.

-Ambrose Redmoon

Deepa was 24 years old and was recently married to Ashok. She was a journalist and was just getting used to her new life. Her marriage celebrations were drawing to a close and both she and her husband resumed their routine work. Deepa was very happy with Ashok and both started drawing plans for their future as young couples would normally do.

It was a Monday morning and after a hectic weekend, both Deepa and Ashok were getting ready to go to their workplaces. While she was applying makeup standing before the mirror, she noticed a swelling in the neck. She tried pressing it but she did not feel any pain. She thought it must be some insect bite or an allergy. She called out to her husband, "Ashok, please come here. Look, do you see a swelling in my neck?" Ashok said "Yes Deepa. Does it hurt?" he asked. Deepa said "No, but it was not there earlier". Ashok said, "Don't worry. We will see our family doctor this evening. I don't think it's anything serious. Maybe he will prescribe some tablets and you will be alright". Deepa also thought, "Ashok is right". She said "OK. Let's meet with the doctor this evening".



Both of them hurriedly left the house and Deepa was fully engrossed in her work that she totally forgot all about her appointment. Ashok called her and reminded, “Deepa, we have to go to the doctor for your checkup. Have you forgotten? Please be ready, I will come and pick you up”. Deepa winded up her work and left to the office.

The family physician examined her and asked her the history. Deepa said she did not have any pain and only today she noticed the swelling. After a preliminary examination, the doctor then advised them that it would be better to consult a surgeon for a biopsy. Both of them left the clinic.

Deepa became depressed and started crying. Ashok consoled her and told her “Deepa, don’t worry. Let us pray that there would be nothing serious. Don’t get worked up. I will fix an appointment with the surgeon”. Though Ashok had temporarily pacified her, he was also worried. They spent a sleepless night... What with the internet providing enough information - The suspense was killing them. She underwent the biopsy and after seeing the biopsy report, the surgeon referred them to me.

The couple met me at the hospital with the biopsy report. I examined Deepa and ordered relevant tests/ investigations. I could not give them the good news that nothing was wrong. The investigations revealed that Deepa had Hodgkin’s disease- Stage II.



With worry writ large on their faces, both of them came for counseling. I told them “I am sorry but it is my duty to inform you that Deepa has Hodgkin’s disease. We can treat her, of course and cure her... But... I hesitated and then gently said, Deepa may become sterile... She may not be able to conceive, but some do conceive!” He said, “It is alright Doctor. There are many couples who are normal but are not able to have children. If need be, we can always adopt a child. The first priority now is Deepa’s life.” Upon hearing this, Deepa burst out crying. She was not able to digest the fact that this was happening to her. Her world crumbled before her. She was sobbing, “No, this cannot be true. I have just started my life. How can God be so cruel?” She was unable to control her emotions.

Ashok took Deepa home and told her, “Look Deepa, I know it is a difficult situation for you. It is also easy to advice others. But let us face reality. Let us be thankful that we were able to diagnose it at least now. The doctor has assured that your life is not in danger. Let us not think about the future. First let us proceed with the treatment and leave the rest to God. It is important that you remain calm. Be positive. Everything is going to be alright”. He hugged her and wiped her tears.

Deepa underwent chemotherapy and after 3 years she came for routine follow up. She was progressing very well. On her next visit, she opened up, “Doctor, it is now 3 years



since the treatment commenced. Can I have a baby now?" She was anxious. It was also natural. I referred her to a gynaecologist. However, Ashok was a little upset that I had entertained this idea. He said, "Doctor, if the tests prove sterile, she will be traumatized. Why stir up a hornet's nest?" His worry also was genuine. Deepa intervened and said, "Ashok, Don't worry. I have faced enough. I have the necessary strength and courage to face anything. Even if the tests prove negative, I will not be affected and I will take it in the right spirit. Please do not prevent me from undergoing the investigation".

I appreciated Deepa's attitude. And of course, Lady Luck smiled on her. All the tests/investigations revealed that she was fit enough to have a baby!

After a couple of years, I met Deepa who was busy shopping for baby clothes. She was so excited to see me and told me "Doctor, the baby is due in 2 months time and the gynaecologist has assured me that there is nothing wrong with the baby". I wished her a safe delivery and I could see how happy she was.

Two months later, Deepa delivered a girl baby, Ananya. The couple brought the baby to me. I blessed the little one. Both of them were ecstatic and their happiness engulfed me too! So Cancer is not a death sentence, if detected early and treated properly, it can be cured and the affected can lead a normal life.



The Fighting Spirit

It's the constant and determined effort that breaks down all resistance and sweeps away all obstacles.

-Claude M. Bristol

Angela was only 22 years old. She was married to Robert only 2 months ago. She had an early marriage because her mother, Stella had breast cancer 10 years ago and wanted to see her daughter settled as early as possible. In deference to her wishes, Angela also agreed and she found a suitable match in Robert. Their wedding was solemnized in their town Church amidst much fanfare. Stella was not only happy but contended that her daughter had settled and any setback in her health would not affect her as she completed her duty towards her daughter.

Angela also was well aware of her mother's ailment and constantly worried about her mother's health. She was all the more concerned because she knew that breast cancer could be genetic. Nowadays awareness of breast cancer amongst woman are high, thanks to the many awareness campaigns that are being conducted by the medical fraternity! There are plenty of advertisements and hospitals which emphasize women to undergo health check up periodically. Further, there are many brochures being distributed on how a woman can easily detect lumps in the breast. Angela had always paid extra care because she knew that chances of her getting affected were more.



One morning as Angela was having her bath she did a routine examination of her breasts. To her shock she noticed a small lump in her right breast. She became instantly worried and she thought of her mother. She came out of the bathroom in tears and called out to her husband "Robert, I felt a small lump in my right breast. It is tiny but still... I am very worried" she said.

Robert told her "Don't let your imagination run wild. It is not a cardinal rule that you will be affected because your mother had breast cancer. However, don't worry. We shall check up with our local doctor today itself".

The same evening, they met a doctor in their locality. She examined Angela and said that there is nothing at all. Perhaps Angela has developed a phobia, she asserted. Robert and Angela returned home. Robert was saying, "See, I told you so. Maybe you are too conscious about this. Just erase this from your mind and relax". But Angela was skeptical. However, she vowed not to entertain further thoughts and treated the matter as closed. Life went on as usual.

A few months rolled by. Angela had the fear lurking in her mind. As she did a routine examination once again, she noticed that the lump had grown in size. She immediately told Robert, "I am scared. I think this lump has grown. Why not we get a second opinion? What do you think about this Robert?" she queried.



Robert was now getting slightly worried. He decided that it is not advisable to waste further time. He concurred with her and suggested, "Don't you think that it would be better to consult an oncologist?" Angela also thought that it would be wise to get an appointment with an oncologist.

The following day they fixed up an appointment with me. I thoroughly examined and listened to her family history. I told Angela, "As your mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, it would be better to get a biopsy done, in the present circumstances, Angela". The couple agreed and the biopsy was performed. As feared, the biopsy revealed that Angela DID have cancer in her right breast. However, the consoling factor was it was early stage disease.

I called the couple for counseling and told them about the findings of the biopsy. Angela cried and said, "Doctor, I knew and feared this... especially, after I had seen my mother..." she sobbed. I told her "Don't worry... You have come at the right time. We can definitely treat you. All you need now is the strength and courage to withstand the treatment".

Robert and Angela left the hospital feeling very depressed. Angela became inconsolable. Robert was very supportive. He said, "Don't lose heart. We should thank our stars- at least we were able to diagnose it at an early stage. I know it is difficult for you... I fully understand... But we have no other alternative..." he consoled Angela.



Angela underwent mastectomy and chemotherapy. She was responding well. But all of a sudden she developed cardiac failure due to cardiomyopathy. She was on medication and became quite stable. She was almost leading a normal life, pursuing her work. It was 5 years since she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Angela and Robert came for a routine follow up. Now she had a wish! She asked me, "Doctor, now that I am almost normal, can I have a baby?" I referred her to a gynaecologist and also advised her to get the opinion of the cardiologist. The cardiologist advised her and said, "Angela, there is no problem. You can go ahead and have a child. But there are two conditions..." Angela asked anxiously, "Doctor, what is it? What should I do? I am prepared to undergo anything to have a child" she said. The doctor smiled and said "Nothing very difficult... All you have to is regular follow-up and that you have to deliver the child only through Caesarean section". Angela heaved a sigh of relief.

A few months later Angela became pregnant. After a full-term, she delivered a baby girl through Caesarean section! One can imagine the happiness of the couple. After so many ordeals, Angela felt elated that she was able to become a mother- a complete woman... she thought.

I admired the grit and determination of this young girl. Despite several odds, she was able to lead a normal family



life and also pursue her work. Angela was not only courageous but intelligent too! She knew that she was more prone to breast cancer as her mother had it 10 years earlier. When she saw the tiny lump in her breast, it had set off warning bells and she took the right decision to consult an oncologist at the right time which probably saved her life!



Strange Are The Ways Of God

Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement.
Nothing can be done without hope or confidence.

- *Helen Keller*

Sanjeeva Reddy was a successful contractor. He was about 45 years old and had steadily progressed in life. He was married to Amaravathi and had two young daughters. His was what one would term as an ideal family. Sanjeeva Reddy was a pious man and would always say "Lord Venkateshwara has blessed me and whatever I have achieved today is because of His kindness."

One morning as he was having his bath, he noticed a lump in his chest. He was wondering what it could be and thought that he should consult his family doctor. He did not give much importance to it as he was very busy with his new project. He did not want to alarm his wife unnecessarily. As he was tied down with his work, he hardly had the time even to visit his doctor.

Almost 10 days rolled by. He observed that the lump had grown in size. This made him worried. He thought "I should not delay any further. Whatever it is, today I shall definitely meet the doctor", he vowed. In the evening he wound up his work a little early and went to the doctor's clinic. His doctor examined him and was asked him details about the lump. Sanjeeva Reddy said, "Doctor, I noticed this lump a couple of weeks ago. As I was preoccupied with my work, I could not come earlier. I felt



the lump had grown in size. This got me worried and then I knew that it would not be advisable to delay it further". The doctor then advised "Mr. Reddy, it would be better for you to consult an oncologist". At the mention of oncologist Sanjeeva Reddy became tense. The doctor reassured him and said "Let us rule out that the lump not being cancer."

Sanjeeva Reddy went home, wearing a sullen look. His wife Amaravathy asked "What happened to you? Why are you so dull? Are you not well? Is it a problem at your work site? Whatever it is why don't you share it with me? It will lessen your burden". Hearing these words his eyes filled with tears. He said, "Amara, There is a small lump in my chest which seems to have grown in size. So, I went to see our family doctor. He suggested that I see an oncologist. I am scared if this tumor could be cancer'. Amaravathy consoled her husband 'Don't worry. Let us have a consultation immediately. Then we shall decide accordingly. Our Lord Venkateshwara will not forsake us".

The family physician referred Mr. Reddy to me and I gave them an appointment the next day. Both Sanjeeva Reddy and his wife came to the hospital. I listened to his complaints and examined him. After regular investigations and assessment, he was diagnosed with cancer that was in stage IV. I called the couple and said "Mr. Reddy, I know this is going to be difficult for you. As feared, the tumor is cancerous and the disease is in the IV



stage". Mr. Reddy was shocked and was in utter disbelief that this was happening to him. His wife also was in tears. He then collected himself and asked "Doctor, can this be cured? I told him that at this stage it may not be possible. However, you have to undergo intensive chemotherapy". After I had explained the pros and cons of the treatment I told them to arrive at a decision and revert to me after a couple of days.

Sanjeeva Reddy and his wife became very depressed. He was all the more worried about his family's well-being. "What about the future? I have two small children. The least I should do is to make my wife and children financially secure. Oh! God please show me the way" he cried.

The next day Mr. Reddy met me in the hospital. This time he came alone and asked me "Doctor, can you spare a few minutes please?" I said, "Sure, why don't you come in?" He sat in silence for a few moments. Then he resumed, "Doctor, I have invested almost my entire resources - a sum of Rs. 2 crores in a project that will be completed in 2 years time. The profits generated would be substantial to create a fund for my family so that my wife and children can live comfortably even after my demise". His voice choked as he was saying this. He continued "Doctor, I just want two years of life", he pleaded. I could understand his apprehension. I smiled and told him "Mr. Reddy don't lose hope...Don't think that everything is lost. Let us first start the treatment and then see how you progress".



The following week the treatment commenced which was quite intensive. Mr. Reddy started responding well and completed the treatment. After 1 year he was free of the disease!

As desired, he completed the project and created a fund for his wife and children. He felt very relieved that he could achieve what he wanted. Mr. Reddy is on a regular follow-up for the last 3 years.

Mr. Reddy was a happy man indeed! He keeps telling that Lord Venkateshwara and the doctors have given him a fresh lease of life. More like a bonus, he exclaims. "Now that I have fulfilled my wish, I will live each day as a boon granted to me and I am prepared to face my end too".

I still remember the day when he walked into my room after he was detected with cancer. He was so dejected and was literally pleading to extend his life for at least 2 years. But today he is a happy and contented man. Strange are the ways of God!



Perseverance Pays

Perseverance is a great element of success. If you only knock long enough and loud enough at the gate, you are sure to wake up somebody.

-H.W. Longfellow

Avinash was a 16 year old boy. His parents, Meenakshi and Sivaraman were struggling hard to provide good education for their son. Avinash was also a cricketer and played for his school team. His parents encouraged him to play cricket as it would prove useful at a later date to get a scholarship or an admission for higher studies in the sports quota. Avinash was a bright student and was aware that his parents were struggling to make ends meet.

Avinash was playing a match for his school team. While fielding, he fell down and injured his knee. There was a swelling in the knee and he was taken to a doctor. The doctor examined him and as there was no fracture prescribed some tablets for the swelling. Even after a fortnight the swelling did not subside. They again took him to the orthopedic surgeon, who opined that could be a tumor and required thorough investigation. He also advised Avinash's parents that it would be better if they consult an oncologist and gave a reference letter to me.

Avinash's parents fixed up an appointment with me. They brought Avinash and I asked them "What happened?" Sivaraman told me "Doctor, Avinash was playing cricket and while attempting a catch, slipped and fell down. He



injured his left leg and we took him to our doctor. The doctor gave him these tablets but the swelling did not subside. He advised us to see you. Is there anything wrong, doctor? I am worried. Avinash has to appear for his X Std exams too". I told Mr. Sivaraman "Let me first examine the child". The swelling was on the upper end of his left leg. After examining him, I told Mr. Sivaraman, "We have to do an evaluation to find out the exact cause of the swelling". They immediately agreed. Avinash was evaluated and was found to have a bone tumor – an aggressive tumor. I felt really sad for this boy who was barely 16 years old. But nevertheless, I had to counsel their parents regarding the findings.

The next day, I counseled both Mr. Sivaraman and his wife Meenakshi. When I said that Avinash had a bone tumor they were devastated. Meenakshi started sobbing inconsolably. I then told them, "I know it is quite difficult to accept but one thing, the tumor has not spread to other parts of the body". Sivaraman enquired, "Doctor, what is the treatment for this? Will he be cured? Is his life in danger?" I had to give them 2 options. "Look, Mr. Sivaraman, there are two options available. One is amputation of the leg or administer chemotherapy and then proceed with limb salvage procedure at a later date". When they heard about amputation, Sivaraman literally wept, "Doctor, I cannot bear to see my son like that. Oh! God! Cricket has been his passion...his life. He always aspired that he would one day play for his country! I don't



think Avinash can even bear to hear this". I said, "Then the only other option available is to undergo chemotherapy immediately". Upon hearing the expenses to be incurred, they became even more worried. They hailed from a lower middle class family and the treatment was not within their affordable range. However, Mr. Sivaraman said, "Doctor, please give us some time, I will arrange for the funds and we can start chemotherapy".

Both Meenakshi and Sivaraman went home with a heavy heart. They met the school Principal and informed him of the outcome. The next day in the school Assembly, the principal made a request to the students. He exhorted them to render all possible assistance to Avinash.

Avinash's school mates and other children contributed money for the entire treatment. With tears welling in his eyes, Sivaraman came to see me and requested to commence the treatment. Avinash underwent chemotherapy. As he had to be hospitalized he could not attend school regularly. His classmates would visit him every day at the hospital and share their notes with him. With the help of his friends he was able to appear for the X Std examination!

The tumor also 'co-operated' – Avinash responded to the treatment. Upon evaluation he was qualified for limb sparing surgery. Though it was definitely good news, the treatment entailed painful physiotherapy. The surgeon



advised Avinash and his parents that perseverance is required to gain strength of the limb combined with painful physiotherapy to get back the strength. Avinash was very diligent and followed the doctor's advice.

The hard labour bore fruits. Yes! Avinash once again was able to participate in the school match. Not only that, despite missing several days of school on account of the treatment, he was able to pass the X Std examination in flying colours! It was time to rejoice! Avinash thanked his friends and school mates who had helped him in every stage- contributing funds and also helped in his studies. Without them he would not have been able to achieve this feat! The recent advances in the management of bone tumors with multi disciplinary approach with discussions with the radiologist, pathologist, surgical and medical oncologists, many patients can now have organ preservation surgeries. The moral of the story is that again, early detection and multidisciplinary management can save many lives with less morbidity.



All is Not Lost

Success is a journey, not a destination.
The doing is often more important than the outcome.

-Arthur Ashe

Durga was 45 years old. Her husband, Ganapathy was a government employee and was diagnosed with renal failure. He had reached a stage where kidney transplant was the only way to save his life. They were left with no other alternative. The couple was childless and Durga was all the more frightened that she would lose him also. They pooled all their savings and decided to go in for kidney transplant. As their resources were also limited, Durga decided to donate a kidney.

She informed the surgeon of her decision to donate and subsequently tests were done to eliminate rejection. The transplant was also a success. Durga felt contented that she was able to save her husband but knew she had to nurse him back to health. So she went about helping her husband meticulously. Ganapathy also progressed and regained his health.

Durga's happiness was short lived. She started experiencing excruciating pain in her abdomen. She initially thought that the pain must have been due to the surgery. When she consulted the surgeon, he clearly indicated that the pain had nothing to do with the surgery and that it would be better if she consulted an oncologist for further investigations and gave a reference to me.



Durga and her husband met me with all the previous reports. I asked “It looks like you have undergone a surgery” and Durga replied “Yes, Doctor. I had donated a kidney to my husband. He was diagnosed with renal failure and underwent a transplant last year”. As I read through the reports, I was shocked to notice that she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer a year ago! The urologist also confirmed that during the transplant he incidentally noticed a tumor in one of the ovaries. He had done a biopsy and it revealed that the tumor was malignant. He also added that Mrs. Durga was aware of the fact and the reports were with her.

I then asked “Mrs. Durga, you knew that you were diagnosed with cancer. Why did you not come earlier as soon as you were diagnosed? Why did you wait for 1 year?” Durga said “Doctor, my husband had just undergone the transplant. I did not reveal it to anyone because at that point of time I could not subject myself to any treatment or hospitalization. I had to nurse my husband and I felt that was my priority”. Further, she continued, “The transplant had drained all our savings. I thought that cancer is not curable and the treatment is also expensive. Why should I waste money unnecessarily for a disease that has no cure?” I did not know whether to laugh or cry at her ignorance. The thought that cancer means eventual death and no cure had firmly registered in her mind and Durga is not alone there are so many patients like her. Only upon counseling that they realize



that cancer is also curable provided they get treated at the initial stage itself. I counseled them that all is not lost even now and that we can start treatment. I told them to discuss and then get back to me after a couple of days.

In the meantime, Ganapathy, Durga's husband met me at the hospital. This time he came alone. He wept, "Doctor, I was not aware that Durga had cancer. She had not revealed it to me. What can be done? It is my turn to save her. After all the sacrifice she has done." His voice choked with emotion. I told him, "We can give chemotherapy and see how she progresses". He said "I am a Government employee and I think I am eligible for reimbursement. Let me check with my office and I shall get back to you as soon as possible".

Durga and Ganapathy came back after a week. They had arranged for adequate funds and she was also prepared to undergo chemotherapy. The treatment commenced and she started improving. She is doing well even now! Ganapathy and Durga regained their happiness. Her recovery gave them enough courage to start building a house for them. The construction also got completed. With their hearts filled with joy, they came to the hospital and invited my entire team for the "Grahapravesam"!

It was definitely a moment for them to rejoice after facing serious health problems!



Women's Emancipation- still a Myth?

We will destroy the idiocy. Of denigrating womanhood
-Poet *Subramania Bharathi*

This story is an incident that happened 15 years ago, which left an indelible mark in my memory. Being in this field for over 30 years I have seen various cases, some very pathetic... One such incident, I feel I should narrate.

Sakunthala was married into a large family - a joint family consisting of eight members and two small children. Her husband Vasu was the eldest son of the family and had to shoulder most of the burden. Sakuntala was very timid and hardly ever raised her voice. They belonged to an agricultural family and lived in a rural area and their mainstay was agriculture. Being agriculturists and belonging to the low income strata, there was always plenty of work for the women of the family. Sakuntala was the first daughter-in-law of the family and she was burdened with not only the daily household chores but she also had to lend a helping hand to her husband in the fields. She almost slogged 20 hours a day without respite. Being docile she hardly complained. Her husband was not concerned about anything else except that he ensured that the work in the fields progressed without any hindrance.

Sakunthala was not keeping good health – she started having abdominal pain and was bleeding on and off for almost 3 years. When she tried to explain this to her



husband, he was annoyed and as she said that the pain was unbearable, he reluctantly took her to a Primary Health Centre (PHC). There they examined Sakunthala and told her that she had an early stage of cervical cancer. The doctor at the PHC advised her to take treatment immediately failing which the disease may worsen and that her life would be in danger. Vasu was not affected by any of these words of caution. As soon as he was out of earshot, he said "Look, Sakunthala it is time for harvesting. You need to be here and helping us out. There is no question of spending money on treatment and fancy tests. The doctors are simply saying all this to frighten us. There is no need to be scared just because of this occasional bleeding". He continued, "Whatever resources we have is required to purchase materials for harvesting. You already know that the cow is sick and it needs treatment. So, I cannot waste money on some treatment for you. You should know that tending to the family should be your priority. I hope I am clear on this" he admonished.

Sakunthala did not argue. She knew it would be futile to convince her husband. She continued her working as usual. Two years rolled by. She developed heavy bleeding. So, Vasu had no option and took her to a local midwife who gave her some tablets. Due to continuous loss of blood, she started feeling very tired. She was scared to tell her husband and continued with her work. As she was very weak, she fainted. Her mother-in-law was shocked to see her health deteriorating. Her neighbours told her that



some doctors are conducting a cancer detection camp in the village and advised her to take Sakunthala immediately without wasting any more time.

Sakunthala's mother-in-law took her to the camp. The doctors examined her and confirmed that she had cervical cancer - advanced stage. She had reached a state where there was no cure...only pain killers could be prescribed to keep her comfortable till her end came.

Sarojini, Sakunthala's 16 year old daughter was a mute witness to all the happenings. She was shocked and deeply hurt that nothing could be done to save her mother. She knew that something was very wrong with her mother and that she had lost a lot of blood. She pleaded with her father to get her mother the required treatment but in vain.

When they came to me, Sakunthala was 35 years old writhing in pain. When I heard her story I was shocked by the appalling treatment meted out to her. She was not even shown the consideration the cow had received! Just because she was a hapless woman she was totally ignored. Sarojini wept and told me that she could do nothing to alleviate her mother's suffering but could only watch the proceedings. This left an indelible imprint in her mind. When Sakunthala breathed her last, Sarojini vowed that she would pursue some sort of education connected to medicine and that she would devote her life to the



needy. As medical course was beyond her financial capabilities, she pursued nursing which she completed successfully. She also underwent training to detect early cervical cancer in an Institute.

It would not be out of place to mention here that cervical cancer is the number one killer in our country. Sarojini helped in detecting cervical cancer in several patients at the camps. She counseled their families and stressed the need for immediate treatment. With tears brimming in her eyes, she says that this would only be the way to appease her mother's soul!

Sometimes I wonder whether women's emancipation is still a myth?



Passive Smoking is Equally Harmful

A cigarette is the only consumer product which when used as directed kills its consumer.

-Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland

Vijaya was about 55 years old. Of late, she was complaining of frequent breathlessness and cough that did not subside easily. She thought she was having asthma like episodes. That morning, as her husband was getting ready for office, she told him, "Can you come a little early today... I need to consult our family doctor... I am feeling very uncomfortable with these breathless episodes..." Her husband, Balakrishnan said, "OK. I shall fix up an appointment. I have told you to relax and not to stress yourself with this household chores... but you never listen". As it was already late for office, he left immediately.

Vijaya finished the remaining household chores and felt that the breathless episodes did not abate. She was wondering what could be ailing her. She was beginning to get apprehensive and was praying that there should be nothing serious.

As promised, her husband came home early and they met their family doctor. He examined her and asked, "Mrs.Vijaya, how long have you been having this cough coupled with breathlessness?" Vijaya answered, "Doctor, I have been having this on and off. I would say of late, it was frequent. Whatever medicine I take for cough also did not



seem to work. I am unable to sleep properly at night". The doctor advised to get a chest X-ray done along with few other tests. He advised them to meet him the next day with the reports.

The next day, Vijaya and her husband met the doctor. After seeing the X-ray he said it would be advisable for them to consult an oncologist immediately. Vijaya was taken aback. She said, "Doctor, Why an oncologist? Do you think I have cancer?" The doctor said it would be better if they sought an opinion from an oncologist without wasting time. Balakrishnan also became worried and requested the doctor for a reference.

Vijaya and Balakrishnan got an appointment with me after a couple of days. Vijaya continued to be breathless. I saw the X-ray and other reports. I examined her and advised her to take a few more tests. The tests revealed that she had early stage lung cancer. Vijaya couldn't believe her ears. She thought she had not heard right. When I repeated, she asked me, "How is this possible Doctor? I am not a smoker! Why should I get this dreaded disease?" I patiently told her, "Vijaya, it is not that only smokers get lung cancer. This can be also due to passive smoking too! In fact passive smoking can cause cancer in people than even actual smokers!" Immediately her husband shot a remorseful look. He then revealed that he was a chain smoker for the last 20 years. He was devastated. He said, "Oh God! It would be reasonable if I was affected, but why my wife?" he cried.



While I was enquiring about the family history, Vijaya said, "My father was also a chain smoker and he died of lung cancer". So, Vijaya had been a victim of passive smoking for almost 40 years! and now she paid a price. Balakrishnan could not digest the fact that he had also contributed for his wife's predicament. He blamed himself and his habit which had affected his wife. He stopped smoking overnight.

Their son Nanda, who was barely 20 years also, had this dreadful habit. When he heard about his mother's ailment he also quit smoking.

Though we have been literally screaming that tobacco is harmful, people do not listen. But why should non smokers should be punished? Why wait till one of our dear ones get affected? Each smoker should realize the danger they are posing to themselves and others. Smoking in public should be totally banned and offenders should be taken to task. Only then the incidence of cancer in passive smokers can be eradicated.

I am reminded of Duane Alan Hahn's words "Before you throw that cigarette butt, remember, that's fire burning at the end of that cancer stick. You are responsible for any property damage or lives lost because of your careless act."



Clinical Trials

I believe in intuition and inspiration. Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution. It is, strictly speaking, a real factor in scientific research.

-Albert Einstein

Mrs. Vasanthi was a 70 year old retired Professor of English. She was operated 5 years ago for cancer in her breast. She thought her problems were solved with the surgery. That was not to be. After the surgery she led almost a normal life. Now after 5 years, one morning as she was bathing she noticed that she was frequently having pains in the right side of her abdomen. She was now a very worried woman. Already having been afflicted with cancer she knew that she cannot ignore the pain. She was wondering whether the dreaded disease had resurfaced. Age had also taken its toll. She mused, "Oh God, what now? How can I withstand any treatment at this stage in my life? I sincerely hope it is not what I fear".

Being net savvy, she was reading about various options/line of treatments available for cancer in general. She was intrigued by 'clinical trials' and the article encouraged people to participate in clinical trials. With all these thoughts in her mind, Mrs. Vasanthi met me. After I had done a preliminary examination and conducted the required tests, it turned out positive for cancer. Mrs. Vasanthi sighed, "Not again... that too at this age".



Mrs. Vasanthi then asked me, "Doctor, what is this all about clinical trials? I surfed the net and I read an article encouraging people to participate in clinical trials". She continued, "Doctor, is there any trial that I may be eligible?". I thought for a minute and then told her "Let me see... one of the hormone manipulation clinical trials for breast cancer may suit you." "Don't get excited... Let me explain to you what a clinical trial is in detail. Then you may arrive at a decision". I elaborated and then said "It is only through these trials new treatments/drugs are regularized. In the U.S and UK several patients volunteer for clinical trials". I gave her some documents and said "Mrs. Vasanthi, please go through all the information given in this brochure carefully and come back after 2 days, if you require further clarification, I'll gladly help". I also advised her, "If indeed you are willing to participate in the clinical trial you should give your consent". I hastened to add, "Don't worry. This consent is in no way binding on you. If you feel you are not happy with the way you are progressing, you are at liberty to withdraw your consent at any point of time during the trial".

Mrs. Vasanthi took leave of me and as advised came back after 2 days and offered her consent in writing. Not only that, she brought two of her friends who had similar eligible criteria for the trial! This incident took place 7 years ago. The drug worked very well on all the 3 patients! Furthermore, the drug has hit the market for consumption by other patients too!



Mrs. Vasanthi was not only happy that she took the right decision and participated in the trial, seeing the results; she has now become an advocate encouraging patients to offer themselves for clinical trials! She has taken it upon herself to offer advice/ counseling patients about the advantages in participating in clinical trials that are conducted properly.

Although in the developed countries, clinical trials are done extensively, here in India, still there is an inhibition that patients who participate in clinical trials are “guinea pigs”. Only when this notion is erased, one can expect clinical trials to gather momentum. It should be properly understood that clinical trials are the major source for introducing newer life saving drugs, which will in the long run save a million lives!



Cruelty of Fate

The cruelest lies are often told in silence.

-R.L. Stevenson

Dr. Chandrasekar, an anaesthetist by profession was diagnosed with testicular cancer 10 years ago. This had metastasized to the lungs. When he came to the hospital I found him quite ill and advised intensive chemotherapy. Dr. Chandrasekar improved very well and responded to the treatment. Naturally Dr. Chandrasekar was excited about his progress. However, I cautioned him, "Look, Dr. Chandrasekar, agreed you have responded remarkably to the treatment. I am happy for you. Nevertheless, you require regular follow-up. I am not saying this to frighten you. You being in the medical profession, I think you will understand the implications better. I am advising you, just to be on the safe side." He nodded and asked, "Doctor, I have another question... Can I get married now as I am almost rid of the disease?" I said, "I am sorry. You cannot get married now... give it some time. It would be advisable for you to wait for at least another 3 years till we declare confidently that your chance of getting affected by the disease is negligible". He looked a trifle crest fallen. But as he had no other option he acceded to it.

I was engrossed in my work and I had almost forgotten about this patient. One fine morning after almost 2 years after the episode had occurred; he came to my clinic with



breathing difficulty. When I enquired what had happened, he hesitantly said "Doctor, 8 months ago I had taken an X-ray. I thought there was mild infection and I just took some antibiotics". He was almost breathless. However, he managed to say, "I have to confess that by that time my marriage was also fixed". I looked at him in dismay. He continued, "Doctor, I am married now". I was shocked by the revelations. I shook my head in disbelief. I felt tongue tied having nothing much to say. He, being in the medical field, and despite my clear warning decided to go ahead with his marriage! I really felt sorry for his wife. I ordered some tests and asked him to meet me the next day with the reports.

The next day he came along with his wife, Anitha who was very young. She was feeling scared and seemed a little restless. After perusing the test reports, it was confirmed that he had full blown disease in the lungs and his general health condition also deteriorated.

His wife was apprehensive and she could not understand why they were seeing an oncologist instead of their local physician. Obviously, her husband had not disclosed his past history!

After examining him, I told them "I hate to say this... the disease has returned with a vengeance and all that can be done is only salvage therapy... and the chance of recovery was rather dismal". His wife was shocked when she heard



this. She broke down inconsolably. She had called her father and explained the sudden developments.

The family met me the next day. I briefed them about the patient's present condition and that it would be a miracle if he is going to make it this time. Tears gave way to anger. The wife's father was seething with anger as his son-in-law had not revealed his health condition before the marriage. He was furious with him for ruining his daughter's life and stormed out of the room stating categorically "Let him face his fate. I am not going to let my daughter suffer. He is paying a price for deceiving us. I shall take her away with me". Though there was some justification in the father's anger, I felt that this is not the time to abandon the patient. So, I decided to counsel the young wife. I called her aside and said, "Anitha, I fully understand your father's anger. He feels cheated and is furious that his daughter's life is ruined and rightly so... But I think that this is not the appropriate time to punish your husband. He needs all the support. He is almost dying. Why don't we work together and give him some quality end... the least we can do now at this juncture?" I paused. "Please give it a thought... It is in your hands now".

Anitha finally agreed to look after her husband till the end. Like most Indian wives, she blamed the happenings on her 'karma' and diligently nursed him till the end. When the end came, he called for me and with his wife at his bedside held our hands seeking pardon.



I really felt sad for this young girl who was on the threshold of a happy married life. She would have started her life with a lot of dreams like any other newlywed, but now her dreams are shattered. It must have been very traumatic for this young bride. Of course, time is a great healer. But who is to be blamed? Her husband who had not revealed his past history? Or is it her fate? No one knows what is in store. Life is full of mysteries, I guess.



Farewell, My Precious ...

To live in the hearts we leave behind is not to die.

-Thomas Campbell

Lavanya was a bright and charming girl– all of 16 years. She was very intelligent and was the school topper. Being the only child of her parents, Janaki and Ravichandran, she was the apple of their eyes! She was a trouble free child and her parents naturally doted on her.

Of late, she had been falling ill frequently and it later transpired that she was diagnosed with acute leukemia. Just imagine the plight of her parents. They were devastated and could not digest the fact that their only child was suffering from this dreaded disease. The worst part was that the acute leukemia was an aggressive variety. This incident happened 30 years ago when there were not many good medicines and there was lack of even supportive care. The child underwent chemotherapy and even the platelet concentrate had to be shipped from Mumbai. I was feeling very distressed as the patient was not progressing with the available treatment at that time.

I thought it fit to have a frank talk with Lavanya's parents about the outcome of the treatment. While I was discussing the matter with her parents, I informed them that the outcome is not going to be good, her parents were not able to come to terms that they were fighting a losing battle and that they are losing their lovable



daughter. They broke down and with tears streaming down their faces, they said they could not imagine a life without their precious little one. They begged me to do all that was possible to keep their daughter alive. I really felt sad for them. I assured them that I am doing whatever I can but it is part of my duty to keep them informed.

After the discussion with me, they did not want to look agitated before their daughter. However, Lavanya was able to gauge from their faces that there were bad tidings. She called out to her mother, "Amma, I would like to talk to the Doctor alone... can you please arrange that?" I went to her room and was enquiring about her, she said "Doctor, I know that I will not survive this disease and my end is nearing... I love my parents and I hate to leave them like this... You know I am their only child". Tears welled in her eyes. Her voice choked with emotion, she continued "Doctor, I have a small request... My parents had planned to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary. Now that I am sick... they want to cancel the celebrations.

"Doctor, can you give them a false report saying that I will get fully cured and it is only a matter of time, so that they will go ahead with the celebrations? I would very much like to be a part of this ceremony!" I was simply dumbstruck by this child's maturity – a young girl barely 16 years old. Even though she knew that she was dying she did not exhibit the fear of death. Instead she wanted to celebrate her parents wedding anniversary! I reassured



Lavanya that I will definitely have a word with her parents. A smile lit up her face.

I called Lavanya's parents and urged them not to cancel the celebrations. I told them it was Lavanya's wish to celebrate the function in a grand manner. All the other family members- her grandparents, her aunts and uncles were more than willing to heed to Lavanya's last wish.

I was specially invited for the occasion. I saw such happiness in Lavanya's face. She enjoyed every bit of the function. I was really amazed at the way this child who was in the jaws of death literally enjoyed herself. Lavanya's parents were not able to conceal their grief but somehow managed not to show their feelings in front of their beloved daughter.

At this young age, Lavanya was bold enough to accept the fact and was resigned to face the inevitable. This is one of the rare incidents that left an indelible print in my mind.



True Friends are Forever

We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give.

-Winston Churchill

Ms. Varghese was a 60 year old lady scientist. She remained single and devoted her whole life to her work. She did not have any siblings neither did she have any close relatives. All she had was her very close friends and her colleagues. She was a lady of exemplary grit and determination. She continued working tirelessly on her research projects but fate willed it otherwise. She had developed a lump in her breast and was later diagnosed with breast cancer – advanced stage!

When she met me with the reports, I suggested that she had to necessarily undergo chemotherapy. I explained to her the effects of the treatment and that she would require some assistance to tide over the treatment. She had absolutely nobody to turn to either for moral or for financial support. But being a lovable person, her friends at the Institute took utmost care. Even her Chief was involved and took the responsibility of looking after her during chemotherapy sessions.

Looking after a patient undergoing chemotherapy is very demanding. But neither her friends nor her Chief relented! Her Chief and her best friend sat through with her patiently while she underwent chemotherapy.



After 1 year, Ms. Varghese showed some improvement. She came to me and said, "Doctor, I need to travel abroad to present a paper at an International conference. Can I travel? Of course, my best friend will accompany me". This travel was scheduled in between two cycles of chemotherapy!

I was amazed at this lady's grit and stamina. Chemotherapy is not very easy to undergo- it has its own side-effects and one requires real strength to undergo the treatment.

Advising her to take certain precautions during travel, I told her, "Yes you can go but please be in time to start the next cycle". She smiled and said, "Yes Doctor. It is worthwhile to undergo this therapy despite its side-effects. It has given me a second lease of life enabling me to complete my research and present a paper".

Ms. Varghese along with her friend left for the International conference where she presented a paper which received International acclaim. She came back with a radiant smile and said, "Doctor, I am now ready for the next cycle".

When her Chief and colleagues visited her at the hospital, her eyes brimmed with tears. She thanked them whole heartedly and said, "Even if I had my own family, I doubt if they would have cared for me as you have. I can never forget the love and affection you have showered on me".



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I also had to admit that she was surrounded by such wonderful people who in spite of their busy schedule took turns to look after her. I was reminded of the saying "When one door closes another opens..."



To Live or to Die- Who Decides?

“Life is what happens to you
While you're busy making other plans.”

-John Lennon

It was ‘business’ as usual for me. I had to see quite a few patients in my Out Patient Department (OPD). It was rather a tiring day and it was almost 1 p.m when I had seen all my patients. When I thought that my OPD was over, I saw a young girl of about 25 years waiting outside my room. It looked like she had been waiting awhile till I cleared all my patients.

When I got up to leave the room, the young girl intercepted me and requested a few moments with me. I wondered what could be wrong with this young girl and offered her a seat. She said, “Doctor, you have not changed at all. You look the same when I met you earlier. But of course, I have changed quite a bit” she smiled. I gave her a puzzled look. She continued, “Doctor, do you recollect seeing me earlier?” I told her, “I am really sorry. I am not able to remember, though you look vaguely familiar. See, age has caught up with me!” I smiled. She then introduced herself. “I am Ramya. I came to see you as a ten year old child!” Now, I started raking my memory. “Yes, now I remember. My... you have blossomed into a pretty young lady. How are your parents?” I queried. Her eyes brimmed with tears. She said, “Doctor, I lost both my parents in a tragic accident barely 6 months ago”.



My memory rewound 15 years ago. That was when Ramya, who was only 10 years came along with her parents dressed in her school uniform. She was proudly holding an award for the 'Best student of the year' in her hand. Her parents wore a very worried look. They were not able to share the joy as they were preoccupied with their daughter's health! They explained the symptoms and showed all the test reports to me. After a thorough examination, I observed that Ramya had 'Acute Lymphatic Leukemia'. Both the parents were devastated and started weeping inconsolably. They were 'sure' that they were going to lose their precious little daughter to the dreaded disease. At that time, Ramya's tiny hands wiped her mother's tears and said "Amma, Don't worry. Nothing will happen to me. I will fight this disease".

I remember how her teachers cooperated with her. She had all her classes in the evening as she had to undergo chemotherapy and blood transfusions in the morning. Her hair had completely fallen off and she had become almost bald because of the treatment. Her friend's mother chipped in with a beautiful wig! She completed 2 years of treatment and she had progressed well. She was placed on regular follow up after the treatment had concluded.

After that, I saw Ramya only now. I asked her, "What are you doing? Are you studying?" She told, "Doctor, I had completed a bachelor's degree in Computer Science. I



had secured a first class and now I am working for reputed IT Company!" I really felt very happy for her. She continued, "Doctor, I have some good news to share with you!" She went out and came along with a young man whom she introduced as Pranay, her fiancé. She told, "Pranay, this doctor is the reason why I am alive today. She gave me a second lease of life!" I told her "No, Ramya. There is some force above us who decides the fate of each individual. We should only be thankful to Him. You came at the right time and hence responded well to the treatment! Early detection and hence early treatment has helped you fight the disease." They took leave of me. I wished them the very best in their life.

When they left, I was just reminiscing. When Ramya's mother came along for chemotherapy sessions, she said, "Doctor, I know with blood cancer nobody survives. I don't know why God has punished us like this! We know that Ramya is going to leave us... We have heard that there are no survivors having this type of cancer." I smiled at the irony of fate. Today Ramya is very much alive free from the disease. But where are her parents? They are not there to see their precious daughter lead a normal life! It is not for us to decide as to who is to live and who is to die. Life or Death is surely not in our hands!



The Hidden Power - Hope

“Life is meaningless only if we allow it to be. Each of us has the power to give life meaning, to make our time and our bodies and our words into instruments of love and hope.”

-Tom Head

I was in the hospital a little early that morning to clear some paper work which had been left unattended for quite some time. After I had finished my paper work, I turned my attention to the patients who had already arrived. I started reviewing my patients. Even as I was examining a patient, my assistant rushed inside and told me that a 60 year old man has been brought in a stretcher and that he required immediate attention. I excused myself and came out to examine the 60 year old man.

After examining the patient and perusing the reports, I came to a conclusion that this elderly gentleman had ‘multiple myeloma’- a disease which involves the bones, spine and blood. The patient, Basheer, was accompanied by his two children. The disease had attacked the spine and the patient had excruciating pain. I called the patient’s children and counseled them to start immediate treatment.

The two sons looked at each other. They said, “Doctor, our father is at the terminal stage. What is the use of spending money when he cannot recover? He is not even able to walk and is bedridden. We don’t think that he will survive for long”. I was totally aghast at their reaction. They were



trying to convince me that their father was dying! Though, I was very angry, I patiently explained, "Listen, your father is definitely not in the terminal stage. As his spine is involved, he is unable to move or be mobile. There is definitely scope for improvement if the treatment is started. It is not proper to just write him off like that". Still, the children were not convinced and were reluctant to commence treatment. However, I impressed upon them that the chances of recovery were good.

The treatment commenced and after the first month, Mr. Basheer started to walk! Thereafter, he came for his follow-up sessions alone and that too he commuted by bus! Mr. Basheer responded very well to the treatment and I was amazed at the man's will power.

After 2 years, while on a follow-up visit, Mr. Basheer enquired, "Doctor, I have one last wish. I would like to go on a 'Haj pilgrimage'. Is it possible? Can I travel?" I smiled and said, "Mr. Basheer, you can make the trip and you are fit enough to withstand the journey". At this, Mr. Basheer felt elated. He has done not less than 5 trips to Haj and is still going strong!

Mr. Basheer now spends his time counseling patients. His refrain is "Cancer does not mean the end of life. Please do not lose hope. I am a living example. If I had lost hope and not taken the treatment then I would have been history by now".



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It is not that all cancers are not treatable. Correct diagnosis and proper treatment at the right time can definitely save lives!



The Key to Happiness

Adoption is not about finding children for families, it's about finding families for children.

-Joyce Maguire Pavao

I had just returned after delivering a speech on breast cancer – which is one of the rampant cancers affecting women all over the world. Earlier, patients diagnosed with breast cancer did not have much hope of survival. But now, thanks to the latest drugs and treatment available, breast cancer can be treated successfully provided the diagnosis and treatment are commenced at the appropriate time! It would not be out of place to mention that most cancers are treatable but it is imperative that they are diagnosed early.

When I reached the hospital a couple was waiting to see me. I called them to my consultation room. I learnt that they were recently married. They introduced themselves- the wife was a German, Stephanie and her husband an Indian, Jacob. While discussing their medical history, it came to light that Stephanie had undergone mastectomy and was found to have 'early breast cancer'. They also informed that they were married only 2 months go!

After examining Stephanie, I discussed the mode of treatment to both of them. Stephanie said, "Doctor, I am ready to undergo treatment. But..." she hesitated, "I would



like to know whether I can have a child after these intensive chemotherapy sessions". Her husband Jacob intervened, 'Listen, Stephie, you should undergo the treatment whether you are able to conceive or not. You are more important... I cannot afford to lose you. Forget about having a baby for the time being". He begged, "Doctor, please start the treatment. Even if she becomes sterile... we can always adopt a baby'.

The treatment commenced and Stephanie progressed well. After 5 years, while having come for a follow-up visit, she asked me, "Doctor, can I plan for a baby now?" I said, "Why not?" I referred them to a gynaecologist.

The gynaecologist found that there was no problem with Stephanie and she was normal and that she is fit enough to conceive. But her husband, Jacob had deficient sperms! It came as a rude shock to them. However, the gynaecologist allayed their fears. She suggested GIFT technique and artificial insemination. But both of them refused to hear about it. They decided to adopt a child! While they were contemplating adoption, they arrived at a conclusion. They decided to adopt a child diagnosed with cancer! So, they went looking for such a child. From a nearby Ashram a child was brought to our hospital with the diagnosis of 'Acute leukemia'. Both Stephanie and Jacob decided to adopt this child and after the legalities were over, they named the child Rose. Stephanie patiently nursed the child and took care of her during the entire



chemotherapy sessions. Rose is now 5 years old and is completely cured! The couple's perseverance yielded the desired result. Stephanie and Jacob's joy knew no bounds. They were so happy and are now planning to adopt another child!

I was amazed at their love and care. It is not easy to take care of a cancer patient - both physically as well as financially. But this couple's decision is something unique and a rarity, such unconditional love... Their action goes to prove that there are still people in the world, who are loving, caring and compassionate. I thought 'All is still not lost in this materialistic world!'



Every End is a New Beginning

"Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born".

-Anaïs Nin

In my career spanning more than 3 decades in treating cancer patients, there have been quite a few incidents which have been etched in my memory. The following is one such incident which did have an impact on me. This relates to two of my patients who were treated at the hospital.

It was the incident where a young woman, Sharanya who hailed from Andhra Pradesh was treated for Hodgkin's disease and another young man Sudeep from Calcutta who was treated for testicular cancer. Both the patients underwent treatment at the same time and successfully completed the treatment.

Sharanya was working as a lecturer in a college and Sudeep was a software engineer. Sharanya and Sudeep used to meet at the Out Patient Department for treatment. After casual enquiries they became good friends too. They were consoling each other. Sudeep had more problems - complications arising out of the treatment. He had very low blood count and was susceptible to infection too. He used to feel very depressed and was starting to lose hope on his survival. He had only his aged mother to look after him. He used to



suffer from pangs of guilt that he was being a burden on his aged mother. Sharanya used to counsel him and tried to lift his spirits. She advised Sudeep not to lose hope and that he should put up a brave fight.

Years flew by and both Sharanya and Sudeep climbed the cancer ladder successfully! One day both of them sought an appointment together. I was happy to see their smiling faces. They said, "Doctor, we have completed the treatment and we are thinking of taking our friendship one step further... We have decided to get married. Could you please advise us?" They were on follow-up treatment for the last 7 years with no evidence of the disease.

I discussed with them and was convinced that both their diseases were not hereditary. I told them, "Both of you were diagnosed with cancer which were curable malignancy. The chance of recurrence is also very low. So, prima facie, I don't see why you can't go ahead with your marriage plans?" A smile lit up their faces. "However, I cautioned them, I do not know if your fertility has been affected- there are chances and both of you would require fertility tests".

Sharanya and Sudeep looked at each other. They unanimously said that they do not want to undergo fertility tests. They continued, "If in case we are not able to bear children, we will definitely go in for adoption". I wished them well and I also felt happy for them that they were able to start their lives afresh after the ordeal.



Two years later I happened to see them shopping with a 'little one'. When they saw me they immediately came to me and held the little one and proudly said "This is our child... we adopted him".

I could see joy in their eyes. I also felt happy for them. What could be more gratifying for a doctor to see their patients who were once at the threshold of death, now leading a normal life, I mused.