

January 21, 2014

This will be redundant for some and uninteresting for many more, but I have had many - at least two - requests for a medical condition update in my own words. The delete button is generally located in the upper screen.

I am still having trouble writing, nevertheless, I think a short history is in order. I plan to write a more complete record of my superb care at Emory Healthcare as soon as I return to normal.

If you are still with me, I talk about myself so often that you know of my five-year war with melanoma. I had my 12th surgery – only 10 of them related to melanoma - last week. The radiologist defeated prostate cancer 3 years ago. There's been 88 days of radiation, 2 rounds of chemotherapy – IL2 is not for the faint at heart – and more CT scans and MRI's than I can count. I had a case of the shingles, just to prove I am not cancer exclusive. I have been to the Winship Cancer Center so often, that many of the administrative and tech staff greets me by name if we pass in the halls.

For the first 3 years, the battle was skin cancer. It was confined to my left/upper scalp, and I was getting inspected monthly. We learned in October 2011 that an escalation had occurred. I was in the mountains of North Carolina, when I noticed a small pimple on my head. I was driving thorough Atlanta, on my way to the Gulf Coast, when I decided to go to Winship for a biopsy. My melanoma surgeon was in the OR, and another surgeon was in clinic. He saw me, and dismissed the “pimple” as a suture from a prior surgery. He did see something else that “looks suspicious” and he did a biopsy. It was malignant, and he suggested a scan before surgery. If he hadn't suggested the scan, I would have most likely gone into surgery without a neurosurgeon. But just one of the advantages of academic medicine – they would have found one.

When your melanoma surgeon calls you on the golf course on Saturday, he gets your immediate attention. The “looks suspicious” tumor had grown into my skull. The following week, I was in the office of the neurosurgeon. I was told that it was unlikely that the melanoma would travel through the skull and dura – membrane covering the brain - and he planned on taking about a 1 inch circle out of the skull, and the plastic surgeon could close it up. Once again, statistics are meaningless to me; I'm an expert at beating the odds. A planned 6-hour surgery stretched into 9 hours and 33 minutes, and in spite of my hard head, the melanoma had gone into my brain.

I was given a few months to live. It was the month before Christmas, and one surgeon said to my family, “enjoy him this Christmas.” The neurosurgeon didn't attempt to remove the melanoma cells, because I might have been impaired. My quality of life would have been negatively impacted for whatever time I had let. Finally, statistics turned for me; I beat the odds on the good side. Oncology at Winship has a lot of tools, and they don't give up easily. They revved my immune system up, and the melanoma sat there on my brain for two years, changing little. I celebrated the 3rd Christmas last month.

I was watching the Sugar Bowl when I lost my ability to speak for approximately 2 minutes. Then it happened several times in the next several days. There was no downside to the operation now.

As mentioned early, I am going to write a more complete history, but I want to tribute to two Emory Doctors that passed away too soon.

Fray Marshall was chairman of the Emory Department of Urology, and he was a world-renowned researcher/innovator. He was from New York, but he was the consummate “southern gentlemen.” He did my prostate biopsy.

Jack Culbertson, plastic surgeon, died in the crash of his private airplane on December 4, 2013. I don't know where to start. He was my hero. When he took over my surgery two years ago, after the neurosurgeon had finished. The hole in my skull was 4x4 inches. He operated almost 9 hours, putting hundreds of tiny blood vessels together. Another plastic surgeon visited me a couple days later, and told me he, “passed through the OR and he thought I was toast.” He said, “Dr. Culbertson likes complicated surgeries, and he had one there.”

To say that I was not down would be an understatement, and to say that Jack Culbertson was a people person would be a gross understatement. He visited me several times, and talked airplanes, fishing, visiting his family in New Jersey, and dozens of other things. He was a renaissance man; he lifted my spirits. He told me they would get the cancer under control, and he would give a new skull that would be better than the old. He was true to his word. There is no replacement for a Jack Culbertson!

There is a distinguished Emory Professor retiring later this year, and I have played a minor role – a very minor role, a miniscule role – in endowing a chair in his honor. I have invited myself to speak at his ceremony – without impediment.

You asked for an update, and I wrote a book.

Wednesday, January 15, 2014

Day 1: ICU As brain surgery goes, this was routine. Only two hours of surgery, one night in ICU, and one night in the Emory Hospital.

The surgeon said, “I got it all that I could see.” It was on the part of the brain that controls speech. I couldn't utter a word on day one. It's slowly coming back, but I will have to take speech therapy anyway. A family member said. “I would have more friends, if I couldn't talk.” All motor functions are normal. Pain free!

Thursday, January 16, 2014

Day 2; I am pain free. I cannot talk, but speech therapy came today, and we practiced. We had already ordered dinner at The Rollins Pavilion - the Emory answer to the Ritz Carlton - and the doc came, and said, "you can go home." Of course, we ate dinner first. The Cordon Blue chef had personally taken our dinner order, and it would have been insulting to skip out. They roll it into your suite on a table with flowers – artificial - on it, and the crab cakes were delicious. Then, we called Uber for a ride home.

Friday, January 17, 2014

Day 3:. Feeling fine, my speech is slowly - very slowly - coming back. I will go to speech therapy. Thinking is even more slow than usual ... if that's possible. Reading is very slow, I transpose words. Writing is difficult. My spelling renders spell check practically worthless.

Saturday, January 18, 2014

Day 4: I can speak, but slow progress. I'm reading complex things, but still having trouble writing.

Sunday, January 19, 2014

Day 5: Slow progress speaking. I am looking forward to real football today.

Monday, January 20, 2014

Day 6: I talked on the phone today. Haltingly, but I could be understood - barely. I am reading at normal speed, and comprehending normally – I think. Spell check is improving on my computer.

Tuesday, January 21, 2014

Day 7: Drove to the supermarket

Praise God from all blessing flow! He apparently is gonna give me a little more time on spaceship earth.