



Andy and Anne A.

## *Chapter 2*

# **In Sickness And In Health**

by Andy A.,  
Husband/Caregiver

Most of the spring and early summer of 2008, my wife, Anne, was having ‘stomach’ indigestion pains for which she started taking Tums. That did not seem to do the trick, so our family physician suggested a prescription medication. A month later at another appointment, Anne continued to complain. So, our family physician ordered a ‘scope’ of her stomach for September 2008. (A side note: Anne joined me in retirement in June 2008, and then this happened.)

I remember that day like it was yesterday. It is NEVER a good sign that when you are in post-procedure recovery and the doctor who performed the procedure pulls the curtain and looks for a chair. As he pulled the pictures up on the computer, he said something about the darker areas. All I can remember him saying is, “Until we get the test results back, I will not know for sure. However, I do this procedure every day, and I think it is cancer in the esophagus.” From that moment, both Anne and I were in shock, in a haze, and very, very scared. I am not even sure what the checkout lady said.

However - and this is not an exaggeration - by the time we walked into our house (we live here in Ann Arbor) we received a phone call from our family physician. She said, “This is the worst possible news. This is what you are now going to do.” And she listed who she was getting for the oncologist and radiologist and that we would hear back very soon.

Unlike others we know that have received similar bad news, we did not go to the internet to learn all we could about esophageal cancer. It just sounded too scary and we did not know any more than our family physician was on top of it and that the University of Michigan Medical Center was world class. We were, ‘In good - the best –

hands'. We did not even know about the existence of the Esophageal Cancer Support Group right in our own back yard.

Over the course of the next two months, Anne received her radiation and chemotherapy, and we met Lori Flint and Dr. Mark Orringer, who monitored Anne's progress to surgery. Surgery had to be re-scheduled a couple of times because the radiation and chemo therapies took their toll and Anne needed more time to get her strength back. Surgery was finally done on April 2, 2009. She was in the hospital about twice as long as expected because of other, non-related surgery issues. I remained by her side 24/7 in the hospital, only coming home for a quick shower.

Recovery was slow but steady. Unlike most of the other patients, Anne had difficulty swallowing and had to see Dr. Orringer three times to be dilated. It was not easy watching Dr. Orringer put this seemingly large hose down my wife's throat as she gagged. At the third visit, Dr. Orringer said that he would watch me do the dilation because I would be the one to do it from now on at home. "Are you kidding me?" I said to myself. "I can hardly watch him do it - how in the world was I going to dilate my wife at home?"

But when you love someone and you work together, with each dilation it became easier for me to do and, I think, easier for Anne. For the first year or so, we dilated fairly frequently - perhaps every two to three weeks. It has become so infrequent now, I can't remember the last time we dilated. And, we are down to the optional annual visit with her oncologist, Dr. Susan Urba. This April 1, 2015 is her six-year anniversary, and we thank God for this blessing.

The Esophageal Cancer Support Group is excellent for pre-surgery information and post-surgery support. Looking back, I still feel that if we had known about the Group, we would not have attended pre-surgery meetings because of our fear of knowing more than we wanted to know. We fully embrace the value of the Group and have attended many meetings these past five years. We all benefit from everyone's stories, experiences, outcomes, and suggestions for dealing with the 'New Normal', as Lori would say.