



Carolyn and Paul E.

## *Chapter 8*

# **My Esophagectomy Story**

by Paul E.

My name is Paul E. I am a married man, now 70 years old. In early 2005 I went to my primary care physician because I was having increasing difficulty swallowing. My primary care physician diagnosed me as having acid reflux and prescribed medication. When that did not help I went back to her in April and she sent me for a barium swallow esophagram test. That test showed that I had an almost complete blockage of the esophagus at the gastric junction, where the esophagus joins the stomach. She then scheduled me for an upper endoscopy exam in early May.

While I waited for that exam date I talked to a family member who had a friend who had a similar situation. This required her friend to have a periodic endoscopic procedure to stretch the opening to the stomach from the esophagus. While this was not something to look forward to, it certainly seemed manageable. I went to the endoscopic exam expecting that this is what I would hear.

When I awoke from the anesthesia after the endoscopic exam, the doctor who had performed the procedure came in and told my wife and me that I had cancer. This came as a complete shock. I had thought that I knew what was coming and never expected this news. We had to wait for the biopsy results to be sure, but when they came in I was diagnosed with Stage III esophageal adenocarcinoma cancer.

This was a very frightening diagnosis. When we researched this condition on the internet we were stunned by the information we found out about the low survival rate for this type of cancer. Up to this time, I had never even heard of esophageal cancer. I was immediately referred to an oncologist who would plan my treatment. He told me that I would require chemotherapy and radiation therapy followed by surgery to remove the affected area of my esophagus.

I was fortunate in that I had a lot of family support throughout this. My niece is a Naturopathic Doctor and she offered nutritional advice that helped me prepare for the chemotherapy and radiation therapy sessions that I would have to undergo. My brother and his wife are trained Reiki practitioners and they gave me Reiki healing treatments while I was receiving the chemotherapy treatments. This helped me deal with the stress. They also helped us research available treatments and identify treatment facilities I should consider.

I found it difficult to decide where to seek treatment under the weight of the terrifying diagnosis. At this time I also started a “Gratitude Book”. This was a journal where every day I wrote down things that I was grateful for. This helped me realize that I had a lot of good things in my life along with the cancer.

Five sessions of chemotherapy treatments started immediately. My oncologist also referred me to a thoracic surgeon for removal of the tumor after the chemotherapy and radiation had shrunken or killed it. The first meeting with the surgeon was very discouraging because he told us that this would take my life. He told me that he would work with another surgeon, who would open my abdomen and prepare the stomach to be pulled up to the neck. I would spend about two weeks in intensive care after the surgery. I asked him how many of these operations he had performed and he told me that he had performed a few. I then asked him who was the best at this and performed the most of these surgeries. He told me that would be Dr. Mark Orringer at the University of Michigan and he offered to give me a referral to him for a second opinion.

Our research told us that the best surgical care for esophageal cancer was right in our backyard from Dr. Orringer at the University of Michigan. Dr. Orringer agreed to see me and we scheduled an appointment. At that meeting Dr. Orringer described in detail what he would do and told me that I would go to my room after the surgery instead of intensive care and that I would be up and walking the next day. I would probably be out of the hospital in seven or eight days. After that meeting we were more encouraged and decided that I would have Dr. Orringer perform my surgery.

At this point my wife and I decided that regardless of the insurance coverage and restrictions, I would go wherever I had to in order to get the best treatment. At this time the insurance plan I had would not cover me at the University of Michigan, but I was very fortunate in that because since I had been with my current insurance company for over a year, I was eligible to switch insurance companies. I switched to Blue Cross and Blue Shield effective the first of August and Dr. Orringer performed the surgery on August 15, 2005.

I was not aware of the Esophagectomy Support Group at the University of Michigan while I was going through all this, but family members put me in touch with two other people they knew personally who had survived esophageal cancer. They both had gone through treatment regimens similar to mine and had surgery to remove the esophagus and pull the stomach up. Both were doing well and happy with the quality of their lives. I was very encouraged by my contact with both of these people. Because I found it so helpful to talk to survivors during my treatment and before the surgery, I continue to participate regularly in the Esophagectomy Support Group at the University of Michigan.

After a few weeks of rest from the chemotherapy and radiation treatments Dr. Orringer performed a Transhiatal Esophagectomy (THE) plus Cervical Esophagogastric Anastomosis (CEGA) on me. As preparation before the operation I walked three miles per day as requested by Dr. Orringer to get my body in shape. This got to be quite difficult to do toward the end of the chemotherapy and radiation regimen. I also used a spirometer regularly to get my lungs in shape. This was also a request by Dr. Orringer.

This preparation paid off as I was able to get out of bed and walk the day after the surgery. The operation went very well and I do not recall having any significant pain. After the surgery, I was greatly relieved when Dr. Orringer told me that I did not have cancer; the pathology report showed that all the margins were clear, indicating that he removed the entire tumor. I went home from the hospital eight days after my surgery in the care of my wife, Carolyn, who deserves much of the credit for my good recovery.

I had a feeding tube when I left the hospital, but we never needed to use it as I was able to eat enough regular food to keep me going. It was not easy because I did not experience a feeling of hunger and most food had no taste at first, but that got better over time. Carolyn kept very close track of what I ate and kept encouraging me to eat so that I got enough calories.

I never had any trouble speaking or swallowing normally after the surgery. I was checked regularly by my oncologist every six months for five years after the surgery and there is no evidence of any recurrence or spread of the cancer.

I was retired at the time of my surgery, but I was able to resume all my normal activities and travel after about six weeks. During the whole process I lost about ninety pounds and most of it has stayed off. I can eat about anything I want - just not too much of it at any one time. I am pretty careful to eat mostly healthy foods. I also have to eat something fairly frequently, but that has not stopped my wife and I from traveling by automobile and airplane and staying in motels and eating all our meals in restaurants for extended periods. If I do manage to eat too much at a single sitting, my usual reaction is a feeling of fatigue, which usually passes within an hour or so. I can now lie down and sleep laying flat on a regular bed. My energy level has long since returned to normal and I am able to do about anything I want. I play golf regularly during the season. I pay pretty close attention to eating healthy now and I usually go for acupuncture once per week. I am very satisfied with my high quality of life since the surgery.