

## Every day is a challenge for many: World Cancer Day is Feb. 4

by Mark Pavilons

For those who are suffering ? from any kind of illness ? every day is a challenge.

It takes every ounce of strength just to get out of bed, go through the motions, only to sink back into your pillow at night with a sense of indifference, even dread.

We put on a brave face ? for our friends and loved ones. When asked how we are doing, we mutter something like ?okay.?

But we're not okay; not by a long shot.

My current response is something along the lines of, ?I'm hanging in there.? Not like the funny feline on those cute calendars, but more like someone who's dangling from a suspension bridge, who's gone through the boards, clinging for dear life.

I'm suffering, more than most know.

My battle with cancer has exacerbated my mental state. Minor physical ailments come and go and I?take my meds and host of supplements each morning, like clockwork. For the most part, you wouldn't even know I'm sick.

But the shadow of uncertainty ? of mortality ? looms large. The phrase ?monkey on your back??comes to mind. For those not familiar with the term, it means grappling with a significant problem (or addiction) that is difficult to shake off. Like that monkey clinging to my shoulder, sometimes scratching its way around, it's an enduring burden.

Positivity alone won't shake it. Hope won't force the monkey to find another perch.

This February 4 is ?World Cancer Day,? a day set aside to raise awareness about cancer, encourage prevention and mobilize action worldwide.

Several organizations believe it's important to shift the focus to the voices that matter the most: the patients.

?Across all types of cancer, the patient experience is an invaluable source of insight into how we can improve care,? according to Breast Cancer Canada.

?While ground-breaking research and advanced treatments are vital, the true measure of progress lies in how patients experience care and outcomes. Patient-reported outcomes (PROs) are transforming how cancer care is delivered by ensuring the human side of the disease is never overlooked. By listening to patients, we're uncovering critical gaps in care, improving clinical decision-making, and driving innovations that reflect what patients truly need.?

Here goes:

My metastatic prostate cancer is like a ticking time bomb. For now, all we can do it try to slow down the ticking and ideally force the gears to come to a grinding halt. The success of my chemo treatment last year was inconclusive.

A phone consult in February, following blood work, will give me an idea as to how things are, and whether my PSA levels remain in check. That's the key, according to my oncologist. If those levels can remain consistently low, I?can continue on.

But that's my life now. I?have to take things week by week, month by month.

It's a mental struggle and a puzzle that offers nothing but mis-aligned pieces.

A recent announcement from the Provincial government noted a new radiation treatment for prostate cancer. I'm not sure whether I'm in line at this point, or even if I need it. But it's good to know things are progressing on that front.

Several oncologists I saw over the past couple of years noted scientists are aggressively working on prostate cancer and constantly looking for new treatments and protocols.

That's good news for those who are newly diagnosed, and those who will be in the future. I only hope something concrete, even miraculous, is on the horizon so I can benefit. I would give anything in the world to live another five or six years.

I avoid reading the life expectancy data for those in my boat, or dinghy. One has to keep in mind that prostate cancer studies, by and large, relate to older male patients, those typically in their 70s or even 80s. That was the typical age group affected by prostate cancer, but that's no longer the case.

During my visits to cancer centres, I was told more men in their 40s and 50s are getting the disease. While it is often slow-moving and treatable, every case is different.

When confronted by such a thing, we often wonder if we could have done something to prevent it. Could I have curbed certain behaviors, exercised more and cut out aspartame or KFC? I read that prostate cancer is one of the few that aren't linked to lifestyle, but rather a breakdown or failure in genes. Do I blame my ancestors and shake my fist at the heavens for passing down the genetic material for this evil?

With that double-edged sword comes the knowledge that my existence (like all of ours) is a miracle in itself. Some 150 generations were needed to pass on the genetic material for me to even be alive today. And I beat the odds of some 400 quadrillion to one of coming into being.

One would think that making it out of the womb in one piece to face this brave new world is a feat reserved for the fittest in the animal kingdom. Bravo to us all!

And yet, how much time have we frittered away in our lives, not realizing the gift we've been given? Why do we waste so much of it when time is the only real, meaningful commodity?

Unfortunately, we don't live in a utopian society where everything is provided and we can sit around philosophizing in our togas, eating fruit from endless bowls. We have to struggle, and earn every step we take.

We have to work and earn money in order to live. We have to strive for more, in order to get more. We have to be a bit lucky as well, to be in the right place at the right time.

The odds are also against us meeting the love of our lives, settling down and having children.

We are all part of that mathematical formula that makes life so inexplicable.

We are not machines, easily programmable with embedded directives. We are thinking, feeling, hurting beings.

We internalize a lot and our brains which can outthink any supercomputer can be our nemesis. Never a dull moment, I should say.

And from the time we have a grasp on our mortality, the clock winds down. We know what faces us all and yet we believe,

somehow, it won't happen.

Immortality isn't possible at the moment. But I can see humanity being downloaded into a massive, collective computerized 'soul.'

I saw a video of a doctor who has spoken with many patients who've had near-death experiences. They all say something similar about the great beyond - it's a place where everyone is accepted and you feel like you're home.

I'm not saying that's something to look forward to, but any tiny morsel of 'more than this' is a comfort.

Why can't we make this place, this world, accepting and hospitable? This life, and all that it contains, should also feel like home.

Let's try to make it that way, while we still have time!