Understanding Cancer: A Patient's Guide to Diagnosis, Prognosis, and Treatment

Author: C. Norman Coleman, MD
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C. Norman Coleman is an American Cancer Society Professor and Chairman of the Joint Center for Radiation Therapy at the Department of Radiation Oncology at Harvard Medical School. He is involved with cancer patients both as a clinician and a researcher. He is extensively experienced in the many aspects of medicine and oncology. He is board certified in internal medicine, medical oncology, and radiation oncology. He recognizes, however, that much of what he learns comes from the patients themselves. He has learned that "Achieving success in cancer care is best done with the patient as an integral part of a partnership." He believes that optimum results are achieved when patients take an active role in their treatment, making informed decisions together with their physicians. He thus wrote this book to arm patients with the knowledge they need to achieve this goal. Dr. Coleman states: "I wrote this guide for you and your family, so that you can be active partners with your health care providers."

The book begins by discussing steps taken from the diagnosis of cancer through its treatment. Along with explaining this in careful detail, a figure is provided with each segment so one can easily understand and picture these steps. The author also provides a patient checklist, pointing out what information a patient should record for future reference. The first chapter provides an overview of the path that a cancer patient will follow, offering the checklist as a map to navigate this path.

The book then explains the molecular aspects of cancer, and the influence that heredity may have. A reader with no scientific background may find this subject intimidating, but it is written with a simplicity and clarity that makes it very easy to understand.
A large portion of the book then describes the treatment of cancer. It explains the different tests that may be performed, what they are like and why they are needed. Different treatment modalities are covered, such as radiation therapy, chemotherapy, surgery, bone marrow transplantation and immunotherapy. The author explains how to weigh the outcomes of these treatments (side effects versus possible benefits -- gains in survival or tumor control). In short, this portion of the book essentially describes the decision-making tree that a physician utilizes to decide the best option for each individual patient.

Clinical research trials are then discussed. The issues regarding potential benefits to the patient and posterity are explained. The author ends by providing the reader with four patient stories, describing how they collected information and used that to make educated decisions in their treatment. This ties the whole book together, showing how to use the checklist from the first chapter and the knowledge gained throughout the book to arrive at these decisions. The book contains two appendices and a bibliography, which provides more resources.

"Understanding Cancer: A Patient's Guide to Diagnosis, Prognosis, and Treatment" covers much information, which can seem daunting. Dr Coleman has delivered it in a concise package. It is extremely well organized, making it easily readable. Chapter and section headings are very descriptive, so readers know exactly where to turn for answers to specific questions they may have. This book is of tremendous value to any cancer patient and their family. It provides the knowledge they need to take an active role in their treatment. It may also be of value to their physicians, because it provides them with an example of how to simplify and explain difficult topics to their patients. This book is a superior reference and is highly recommended by OncoLink.