



Working in the Cancer World



Bob and Queenie

I often talk with people while they're receiving chemotherapy. Recently, one woman asked, "How long have you been doing this?"

I knew that she was talking about my work, so I replied that I've been visiting with cancer patients for more than ten years. She then asked, "How do you do it?"

She went on, "You deal with cancer every single day. Some patients won't ever get better. And nearly everyone you talk with must be scared, sick, or both. Doesn't it depress the hell out of you?"

Although the question was directed to me, it just as easily could have been directed to the doctors, nurses, radiation therapists and others who work with cancer patients on a regular basis.

I posed the question to a nurse who responded, "Everyone who begins cancer treatment will have an outcome. Sometimes that outcome is a cure, sometimes it's not a cure, but a longer life, and sometimes the outcome is that the person dies no matter what we do."

She said, "I can't focus on the outcomes - I focus on the journey. I can make the journey better for people and that brings me satisfaction."

One physician told me she wishes that no one would ever say the words, "There's nothing we can do." She said, "There's *a/ways* something we can do. We can control pain, we can provide comfort, we can listen."

A hospital chaplain told me that his job is to be with people when they're in dark and scary places. It's not a matter of fixing things. It's a matter of sharing the experience so that no one is alone.

There's an underlying theme to all of these comments. Working with people with cancer requires a focus on what you can do, rather than on what you cannot do.

The losses that inevitably occur in oncology affect everyone who shares that space and that journey. It's so important to have loved ones and colleagues who understand and support the mission of this work.

We're also bolstered by those patients and their family members who come in and somehow make life better for everyone in the room. Some possess a quiet dignity and others crack goofy jokes that make us laugh.

And don't forget that many people diagnosed with cancer are cured and go on to live rich, full lives. I often see former patients, who were once bald and pale, looking robust and healthy.

But I also like to see the patients who aren't doing well. Sharing each journey is a privilege.

Bob is the Executive Director of the Cancer Resource Center. His articles about living with cancer appear regularly in the *Ithaca Journal*. He can be reached at bob@crcfl.net

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