



Counting by Cancer

BY DANIEL J. BRESSLER, MD

Introduction

In February of this year, a family member of mine died after a long and difficult battle with cancer. Most of my conversations with her over the last year of her life had little to do with my knowledge of medicine (she had her own excellent team of doctors for that) but with personal matters having to do with our families, her thoughts about the future, and sometimes about the changes going on in her own body. It was, among other things, a series of nontechnical lessons in clinical oncology delivered to me from the inside out.

As we've known for a number of decades, cancer is not one disease but a diverse assemblage of dysfunctions. Some cancers are easily cured, others controllable, and others (most still, it seems) march on with a gruesomely determined inevitability that defies our cleverest therapeutic maneuvers. Because of both its diversity and generally progressive nature, we describe cancer using a set of numbers, the most basic of which are stage and grade. There are also precise numerical assignments related to bone marrow

response to chemotherapy, ejection fraction diminution from the cardiotoxic drugs, and the Karnofsky score, which enumerates the residual functional capacity of a human life struggling with the disease.

Driving home from my visits with her, I often reflected on her mixture of gritty determination and fearful self-observations. There were long-term plans about the future but also complaints about her weight loss. There was her faith in God and in her doctors, and her grim sense that the disease was progressing. One morning, a few months before her death, pieces of our conversations started to assemble themselves into a poem about her disease told in the form of a nursery rhyme or a jump-rope sing-along, using the numerical theme so prevalent in discussions of cancer.

This poem is dedicated to her. **SDP**

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Counting by Cancer (in memory of DSF)

*One two three four
You ask are my large muscles sore
Four three two one
Chemo's not my kind of fun*

*Two three four five
Tired but very much alive
Five four three two
This is me, it could be you*

*Three four five six
Oh boy, new medication tricks
Six five four three
And all the side-effects for free*

*Four five six seven
Feels like hell, on fire even
Seven six five four
Distant knocking from heaven's door*

*Five six seven eight
Sport a grin and stand up straight
Eight seven six five
Still ambitious to survive*

*Six seven eight nine
It was malignant, not benign
Nine eight seven six
Why do my legs resemble sticks?*

*Seven eight nine ten
I can still remember when
Ten nine eight seven
The future was a loom to weave on.*