

Dick Donohue's Lymphoma Story

On December 1, 2004, I was diagnosed with follicular B-Cell Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. I have created this blog so that I could provide updates and information about my condition to my friends and relatives. It is also a journal for me to help me sort out my feelings. Maybe it will help somebody else who is going through the same thing.

Approximately 332,000 Americans have Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma (NHL). Each year approximately 54,370 new cases of NHL are diagnosed and 19,410 Americans die from the disease.
The overall five-year survival rate is 56%

Saturday, December 04, 2004

How it all began

I have known for a few months now that God had something "big" planned for me. This has happened before. He doesn't tell me what the "big new thing" is that is coming, but He lets me know that I need to prepare myself for a big change in my life. Once it was a great new job. Once it was that I was going to become [self-employed](#). This time, I was totally shocked. I have cancer. Here's how this new chapter of my life unfolded:

I have had a rash on my head for a while. It started out small. When it didn't go away for several weeks, I went to my regular doctor. We both figured it was just some kinda fungus. He gave me some medicine to put on it every night. I was not consistently applying it and figured that was why it still didn't go away. But it has never hurt or itched or anything like that; and I really didn't want to spend more on doctors for something that was a minor inconvenience. You couldn't really see it since it was in my hair. So I didn't do anything about it.

Then, about 2 months ago, it started bumping up and changing shape almost daily. That's when I asked a friend of mine to recommend a good dermatologist. He is an Ear, Nose, & Throat doctor -- and a praise singer at my church ([Southridge Church](#)). I called the dermatologist he recommended and was told the earliest that I could be seen was December 6th (which was over a month away). I told my friend that I had set up an appointment. He was quite concerned. He said, "Come into my office, I have a physician's assistant who knows a bit about 'derm'; he can take a look at it. The least we could do is get some biopsies and send it in to the pathology lab to find out what it is/isn't. If nothing else, it will give the dermatologist a head start" (no pun intended)

Doctor, Doctor, Gimme the News

So I did. They took two punch biopsies and sent it in to the lab. The lab said that it was difficult to diagnose and that they wanted a bigger sample. So I went back in to my friend the doctor and he took a bigger sample (I had to get 4 stitches to close it up). The lab ran more tests and said essentially that before they were willing to make a diagnosis, they wanted to get a second opinion from the Mayo Clinic. So they sent a bunch of slides and a little chunk of my head off to Mayo. Mayo did some DNA level testing. A couple of doctors there looked at it and said "the findings were consistent with a diagnosis of malignant lymphoma with a B cell phenotype".

On December 1, 2004. The results from Mayo were faxed to my doctor friend who gave me the bad news. He also got me an appointment the next day with "the one of the best oncologists in the area" Dr. Jeffrey Letzer. I was in shock. I went home and told my wife, Sherry and we held each other and cried.

Meet The Oncologist

The next day, Sherry and I met with Dr. Letzer (nice guy). He said that we know what type of Lymphoma it is (there are about 30 different varieties). So the next crucial step is to determine the scope of the growth of this stuff. Is it just on my head? Or did it start somewhere else and spread to my head? If it is just on my head, that's good. That means that it is in Stage 1. If it is in stage 1, then the treatment will be just radiation and there will be a 50% chance that it will CURE the cancer. If the lymphoma has spread or if the radiation does not work, then my cancer is not curable. In that case, the goal of treatment will be to get the cancer into remission and keep it there as long as possible. In that case, the treatment will likely be a combination of chemotherapy (can you say barf-o-rama?), radiation, and biotherapy (whatever that is).

In order to determine if there has been any growth, I will need to go through a bunch of tests. So next week I have a bone marrow test scheduled for Monday, and a full-body CAT scan scheduled on Tuesday. Then, later in the week or the following week, have to get a PET scan. I'm told that that kinda like a CAT scan only it's a different animal :-)) and that sometimes it can show things that the CAT scan does not.

posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/04/2004 11:19:47 AM

Saturday, December 04, 2004

Telling friends and family

The next big step for me was telling my family and friends. First, I told my parents. I had just visited my mom in Fort Myers, FL and told her that I was waiting for test results from Mayo. Then I called my Dad. He was shocked. Then I called or emailed my siblings. Everybody is shocked; some cried.

Right after meeting the oncologist, I went to band practice (I play harmonica and guitar in the band at church). I told people in the band and the praise singers. They all laid hands on me and prayed for me. It really meant a lot to me. I strongly believe in the power of prayer. It means a lot to me to know that people are praying for me.

Then I had to tell my kids (I have a son, age 13 and a daughter age 10. I also have a 24 year old step-daughter with Down's who lives with us). I was very nervous. I read a couple of good [articles](#) on the subject on the Mayo Clinic's web site. I called an "emergency family meeting" and brought them to my house. I was open and honest and told them I have cancer. I told them my cancer is called Lymphoma and that I'd be sick and have to go to the doctor a lot. They took it much better than I thought. I'm not sure they fully comprehend the impact that this will have on our lives. I'm sure it will become more apparent to them as time goes on.

As of this writing, I've told this story several times to my family and some close friends. I know that I want to inform more of my friends -- some of whom live out of town. And to facilitate that, I thought I'd set up this blog on my web site.

Several people have asked if I mind if they pass my name on to their church or other prayer groups. Please do! Prayer, to me, is the first step to healing. Please pray for healing.

posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/04/2004 08:39:55 PM

Sunday, December 05, 2004

Lotsa love and prayers

Today in church, they announced to the congregation that I was diagnosed with cancer. Pastor Mark had everybody circle around me and pray for me. (For me and Sherry at the 11:00 service). It was very a very powerful moment. I don't think I've ever been hugged so much in my whole life! At the 11:00 service, Becky prayed for not just remission but for a cure. That would be an awesome testimony to God and the power of prayer, wouldn't it!?

Tomorrow, I have a bone marrow test. Then on Tuesday, I have a CAT scan. The goal is to see if the cancer has spread from my head to other parts of my body. Please pray that it hasn't spread.

Posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/05/2004 03:49:39 PM

Monday, December 06, 2004

Bone Marrow biopsy

I found a great website with information on Lymphoma: the [Lymphoma Resource Foundation](#).

Today I went in for a bone marrow biopsy. I had a choice of getting it done in the office or if I was a real wimp, they could do it in the hospital and knock me out. Naturally, I went for the wimp option. It's a little scary that there are drugs out there that can knock you out so fast. But I was really glad they used it today! I was pretty sore when I left.

I'm really happy with Dr. Letzer. And his staff is great! They have rearranged the rest of my tests so that they would get done sooner. Tomorrow, I go in for a PET scan. Wednesday, I get a CAT scan. Then, I go over all the test results with the oncologist on Friday. Then, we should know what stage the cancer is in. That will dictate my treatment options.

posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/06/2004 10:00:14 PM

Wednesday, December 08, 2004

Testing completed

Ok, all the tests are done. I completed the PET scan yesterday and a CAT scan today. Both tests were similar. They slid me into a big mechanical donut and told me to lay still. For the PET scan, they injected a radioactive dye into me just before the scan. For the CAT scan, they injected something called "contrast" that has a similar function. For the CAT scan, I also had to drink some contrast an hour or so before the test. It tasted like puréed aluminum foil. (yech!).

I've been told that there are people praying for me in Michigan, New Hampshire, Florida, California, Alaska, Maine, and Montana. Wow! I don't know how to explain the feeling other than that I have a great feeling of peace. If you have been praying for me thank you!

Tomorrow I'm actually going to go into work. Friday afternoon I get the test results and go over them with Dr. Letzer. Pray for stage 1 (no spreading).

I watched the movie "The Passion of the Christ" (the Mel Gibson movie) again last night to remind myself that whatever God has planned for me (chemo, radiation, whatever), it is nothing compared to what Jesus has already gone through for me. I am up for the challenge. To God be the glory!

posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/08/2004 04:10:17 PM

Thursday, December 09, 2004

Test Results and Treatment Plan

I received a call at work from Dr. Letzer's office today at work. Instead of seeing me Friday at 2:00, the doctor wanted to see me today. "Oh no" I thought. It doesn't take a political scientist to figure out that when they move up the appointment to discuss test results, it's not because it is good news. On the way home from work, I was sure that the news was going to be horrible.

As it turns out, the news was bittersweet. They found cancer in my bone marrow. The doctor said that he did two bone marrow extracts (one on either side of my spine). One side showed no cancer at all. But the other side had a small amount of cancer. That's all it took. If any shows up in the bone marrow, then it is considered stage 4 (meaning widespread). But more importantly, it means that it is not curable. That is a very sobering thought. One that I haven't fully processed yet.

The good news is that the prognosis for getting it into remission is very good. The other good news is that I won't need chemotherapy. I will use a biotherapy drug called Rituxan. The advantage to Rituxan is that the side affects are minimal. I won't lose my hair (unless I pull it out), and it won't affect my immune system like chemotherapy does. I will get a treatment one day a week for 4 to 8 weeks. By then the cancer should be in remission. Then I will need to get another dose of Rituxan and a CAT scan once every 6 months.... until it comes back and then we start over with another drug and just keep trying to keep it in remission. I will also get this catheter installed under the skin. They use that whenever they need to do blood draws and when they give me my dose of Rituxan (or whatever). I will have this in me for the rest of my life.

If I get the ok from my insurance company quickly, I can start the treatments tomorrow. Otherwise, I will have my first treatment on Monday. Pray that my first infusion of Rituxan goes well. If there are side affects, they will happen on the first infusion.

I'm sad knowing that my life will be forever connected to my oncologist's office (not that they are bad folks-- they are not). I'm sad knowing that my life will not be as long as it would have been otherwise. I don't know how long I will live. But probably not as long as if we could have cured the cancer. But I know that there is a lot of good news received today. As we left the doctor's office, we saw the most beautiful double rainbow. I was reminded that God is with me every day. Some days faith is as easy as leaning back and feeling the warm sun on your face. Some days it is like hanging on to a flag in the middle of a hurricane. If you ask me how I'm doing today, I'm hanging on with everything I got.

posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/09/2004 11:46:51 PM

Friday, December 10, 2004

Pre-existing condition?

Well, here's another challenge. I switched insurance companies back in July and my insurance company wants to make sure that I didn't have a pre-existing condition before they will authorize payment for the Rituxan. So I wasn't able to start my treatments today. I don't blame the insurance company: Rituxan is not cheap medicine. I was told that it costs about \$4000 per dose. And I will need between 4 and 8 doses. That's a lot of money. One person on the web said that, if measured by volume, Rituxan costs more than diamonds. That sure puts it in perspective.

The frustrating thing is that I know for sure that it was not preexisting. Heck, I just got the diagnosis on 9 days ago. But I've been going around to the doctors and pharmacies that I've been to in the last two years and getting copies of my records. I took them over to the oncologist and they add them to their own records and will fax them (about 40 pages worth!) to the insurance company. So hopefully, I will get authorization yet today and can start treatment on Monday.

I've received several positive comments on my blog. Thanks. Thank you to all of you who have been praying. I'm not giving up hope for a miraculous cure. God always has a plan; sometimes it coincides with doctors' predictions, but it is not a requirement. Please continue to pray for that cure! (and fast insurance review).

posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/10/2004 03:15:37 PM

Monday, December 13, 2004

Unwilling to wait

I've called the insurance company. They said that any claims submitted for my cancer will be pended (not approved, but not denied) until they have completed their review. Unfortunately, they also said that their review process will take 14 days. A friend of mine once told me "Patience is a virtue; Unfortunately, it's not a virtue I possess!" I like that. I understand that! I'm just not willing to wait 14 days for some insurance doctor to look at my chart and decide that (duh!) it's not a pre-existing condition. I called the doctor's office and I am starting my treatments tomorrow (Tuesday). Pend away, ye insurance beaurocrats! In the meantime, I'll be getting well!

Fantastic Support

I have had so many people tell me that they are praying for me. I can't tell you what a wonderful feeling that is. There have been times when I've just known (don't ask me how), that certain people were praying for me. What an awesome and humbling feeling. I just read about a study done in a coronary unit of a California hospital in 1988.

"Researchers found that patients who had been prayed for by others tended to recover with fewer complications than those who received standard treatment without prayer.

Their need for antibiotics was one fifth that of other recovering patients, and they were one third as likely to develop pulmonary swelling"

So thank you so much for all your prayers.

I also found a great source of support on a message board at the Lymphoma Resource Foundation [web site](#). Based on advice from a lymphoma patient there, I've decided to stop calling my lymphoma "incurable". I now call it "*currently incurable*". There are advances every week in cancer research. And like I've said before, "I have a great doctor, but he's not God!"

Pass the Veggie Burger please

I have been doing a lot of research and have found numerous articles, studies, etc. which indicate that cancer is not the disease. It is a symptom. The disease is poor nutrition. By that I mean a high-fat, meat-eating diet with very few high fiber fruits and veggies. I'll post some links here later, but I've decided to cut out eating beef for now. I'm finally going to kick my Diet Coke addiction (5 days so far) and I've been drinking much more water. A major goal is to eat more food like God provides it (less processed foods). Who knows? This may be harder to take than the Rituxan! ;-)

Please pray for my first treatment (tomorrow!) to go well. I'm told that 80% of side affects with Rituxan occur during the first treatment.

Thank you so much for your continued prayers.

posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/13/2004 01:10:36 PM

Tuesday, December 14, 2004

First Treatment

(I had trouble with the blogger program and was not able to post this until a day later)

Well this was an exciting day -- not fun-- just exciting. I went to the doctor's office for my first treatment for lymphoma. I was accompanied by my ever-faithful wife, Sherry, who has been by my side throughout this whole adventure. I don't know how I'd ever make it without her. She's been my comforter, my advocate, my nurse, and my cheering section. No doubt about it: I married "up".

Any Port in a Storm...

A "Porta-cath" (also known as a "port") is a catheter that is surgically implanted under the skin. The nurses can easily get blood-draws and administer the Rituxan using this and it is commonly used with patients getting chemo. I had been questioning whether or not I should get one for just 8 doses. That question was quickly answered this morning. The first thing that happened was that I got a pricked 5 times (1 blood draw, 1 IV inserted and the 3 failed attempts to start an IV which immediately preceded it.). It is safe to say that

I'll get the porta-cath as soon as I can.

The Big Reaction

They had told us 80% of the side affects with Rituxan are experience with the first transfusion and that most people experience some side affects. The most significant side affects are allergic reactions to the drug. So they gave me some Benedryl and Tylenol before they started the treatment. The treatment is an intravenous (IV) drip that can take between 4 to 8 hours depending on the flow rate. (They start out slow (12mg/hour). Then, every 1/2 hour they increase it by 12 mg/hour. The full dose is 500 mg.

So I started out slow. They told me to be aware of *any* changes. I got up to 24 mg and towards the end of the cycle, my ears started to itch. Sherry said that she noticed my lips had turned red. We then cautiously kicked up the flow rate to 36 mg/hour. Within minutes the itching became very serious itching around my face, then my scalp. We called the nurse over and she shut off the Rituxan drip. This didn't stop the allergic reaction. My face started becoming flushed and it felt like somebody had blown up a balloon in my sinuses. Suddenly, I could not breathe through my nose at all! Sherry noticed that I had a rash over my chest. I began to feel nauseous and it felt like somebody was giving me kidney punches in my back. My neck and face was swollen. The nurses gave me more Benedryl and other medicines to counteract the nausea.

I knew I had to relax. I took deep breaths and just kept whispering "Lord heal me, Lord heal me". Eventually, I stopped swelling; and after about 2 hours with just a saline drip, I could breathe through my nose. That reaction seemed like it had come on so fast. It was so scary!

When I was ready, they restarted my drip again at 12 mg/hour. I was doing great. Because my first reactions showed when I was at 24 mg/hour, they decided to leave it at 12 mg/hour for a while. I was doing great. After a while Sherry looked closer and noticed that the Rituxan was not dripping. In the excitement, the nurses had shut off the Rituxan on the machine that regulates the flow, and they had also pinched the hose with a clip. When they restarted it, they turned on the machine, but forgot to release the clip. So I had spent almost 2 hours with no medicine. I was behind schedule because they had to stop the drip for 2 hours when I had the reaction, but now I was really behind. I had only received about 36-48mg out of 500. So I will have to go back tomorrow and try to get as much of the rest of the dose as I can. (oh joy!). Depending on how much Rituxan I can take, then I may have to come two days a week for my infusions. My mother pointed out that if I had started my treatment according to *my* calendar (on Friday), I would not have been able to get the 2nd half of the treatment because a dose of Rituxan once mixed lasts only 48 hours. So once again God's calendar proves to be wiser and prevails over my calendar.

Good News

In the middle of all the excitement with my "Big Reaction", one of the billing nurses stopped by to say that they had heard from the insurance company. They said that they determined that my cancer is not a pre-existing condition. Consequently, all my expenses

(sans deductible) will be covered by insurance!! I know that many people were specifically praying for this. Thank you.

More Good News

When I came home tonight. I think that the bump on my head (where this all started) appears to be smaller! Praise God! I took some pictures a while ago. I was thinking about posting them (but they are not attractive). I think I will now so that we can see the progress of it going away.

Well, I'm whipped. Gotta another big day (and hopefully a shorter post) tomorrow. Pray for strength. ([Isaiah 41:9-10](#))

posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/14/2004 11:28:37 PM

Wednesday, December 15, 2004

First Treatment (Day 2)

Because of a misconfiguration at Blogger, I was unable to post yesterday's blog entry until tonight.

This morning, after a restless night, I woke up with some of the symptoms that I had with yesterday's allergic reaction, although they were much less severe (itchy face & scalp, face flushed, and rash on my chest). So we waited until Dr. Letzer could see me before we started treatment with Rituxan again. I was very concerned that he was going to say "no" to the Rituxan. Any other treatment would have to be chemotherapy (Rituxan is a "biological" therapy and the only one of its kind for my type of lymphoma). Chemotherapy would significantly decrease my quality of life over biological therapy. Fortunately, he said that they were just symptoms of the steroids that they gave me when I had the reaction yesterday.

But Dr. Letzer was very encouraged by obvious decrease in size of the bump on my head. So I started on Rituxan this morning at the lowest dose all morning. We kept it there until the afternoon. Then we kicked it up to from 12mg/hour to 18 mg/hour and that was just enough to finish the dose by 6:30pm . I never had any more allergy symptoms; overall, it was a very uneventful day -- which is a good thing.

I looked at my head when I got home and the bump is smaller still! Woo Hoo!! Praise the Lord. It's ironic that I hated the bump on my head so much and now I am thankful because I am one of the few cancer patients that can actually *see* the results of the medicine working.

I know that the reason I am experiencing this quick healing is because there are so many people praying for me. Thank you so much! Praise the Lord!

posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/15/2004 07:53:11 PM

Saturday, December 18, 2004

Prayers, Cysts, & Photos

Prayer Shawl

One of the wonderful ladies from [my church](#) came by with a gift. Apparently about 20 women had started a knitting ministry. I was the first recipient. They knitted this absolutely beautiful blue shawl and said that with each stitch, they said a prayer. I was humbled and overwhelmed. When I get my Rituxan treatments, the medicine lowers my blood pressure which makes me cold. So I will wear this shawl when I get my next treatment. Thank you, ladies.

Cystectomy

The first time I saw my oncologist, I casually mentioned that I also had a bump on the top of my thigh. When he saw it, his eyes bugged out.

"How long have you had that?!", he asked.

"A few years", I shrugged, "My regular doctor always indicated that it was probably benign and that he could take it off whenever I wanted. It just never bothered me, so I never had him take it off." The oncologist stared at me in disbelief. It was as if he was wondering how somebody this dumb was capable of carrying on a conversation.

"Well, that's coming out!", he said. And he had his staff set up an appointment with a dermatologist.

On Thursday, it came out. It reminded me of an iceberg. It didn't look so big on the surface... I have to admit, if I had known that it was as big as it was under the skin, I would have had my regular doctor take it out long ago. It was about 3/4 the size of golf ball. The dermatologist said that he'd send it out for biopsy. I've got 11 stitches and it has slowed my walking down considerably. Sherry has changed the dressing three times already. I can't begin to tell you how blessed I am to have Sherry watching out for me and taking care of me. I love you, sweetheart!

Photos

I had taken some photographs of the lump on my head where the lymphoma first showed up. Then after my first treatment with Rituxan, I couldn't believe how much it had started working, so I took some more photos. I realize that I don't get to physically see many of you. So I thought that I would put the photos on my new "[My Lymphoma](#)" photo page. My plan is to take pictures after each treatment and (eventually) add them to that page.

Thank you!

I wasn't sure how many people were checking out my blog, so I added a counter. I've received over 150 hits just in the last 24 hours! Wow! I really do appreciate your prayers and concerns -- especially prayers.

What's next?

On Monday, we go in for outpatient surgery to get a Portacath installed. (For more portacath details, check [here](#)). Then on Tuesday, we go in for my next treatment. Pray for the Portacath to be installed without a hitch and please pray that, on Tuesday, we can get the whole dose of Rituxan done in a single day (9 hours).

posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/18/2004 02:30:25 AM

Monday, December 20, 2004

Port Installed, keeping upbeat

Well, thanks to your prayers, my portacath installation went without a hitch! Sherry and I went in to the Outpatient Surgery part of Borgess Hospital very early on this cold, cold morning. The nurses were great and Sherry was by my side for most of my conscious moments. I remember getting on the operating table and have a vague recollection of somebody pressing on my chest but other than that, I don't remember the operation at all. We came home before 11 and I slept most of the afternoon.

They put the port in just over my right nipple. It's a little swollen, so it's hard to tell how visible it will be. I suspect that I've probably gone up a cup-size. There is only a dull pain, but it's not bad.

Several people have asked "how can you be diagnosed with *"currently incurable"* cancer and still be up-beat?" I guess it is a conscious choice to choose my perspective and my attitude. Sure, I could focus on not having had any income for 2-3 weeks. I could be upset by how much hardship I have brought on my wife and family. I could worry about medical bills. I could get angry at God and ask "Why me?". But what's the point? My faith tells me [not to worry](#). I know that I am supported by the prayers of so many friends and loved ones. I have the undying love and support of my best friend and wife, Sherry. And I know that, with every breath I take, I am in God's hands. That faith allows me to change my perspective so that I can focus on the good things happening. I can actually [see the progress](#) of the Rituxan. (I get downright giddy about that!) There have been so many "silver linings" to this situation: I have a friend who went to church for the first time in 39 years. I have re-established contact with friends that I have not talked to in years. I honestly don't know how anybody could survive this without faith.

Tomorrow, we start my second treatment; it will be the first time that they use the portacath. Please pray that the portacath works well and that I can get through the infusion in less than a day. And as always, my most fervent prayer is that the cancer does not just go into remission, I pray that God will wipe away the cancer forever. I appreciate your prayers so much! Thank you.

posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/20/2004 09:47:25 PM

Wednesday, December 22, 2004

Second Treatment

Sherry and I went to Dr. Letzer's office again. He is extremely happy with the progress that the Rituxan is having. His P.A. was excited and amazed. It was real encouraging to see her reaction. Dr. Letzer said that he wanted to be safe, so he would not let me take the Rituxan any faster than 18 mg/hour today. That's a real slow rate, but it would ensure that I would not have another allergic reaction like I did last time. So I was not able to finish the treatment in a single day. I will have to go back to his office to get the rest of the dose. I have to admit, I was really disappointed. But like Sherry said, "It's a lot better than having your airway constricted!" I had to agree. I was able to get more than 1/2 the dose done, so I don't think that it will take another full day to finish the dose, so that's good.

My sleep schedule is all out of whack. I slept during the day yesterday after getting the portacath installed. I take Benadryl and Tylenol (to avoid the allergic reaction) while getting the Rituxan. I ended up sleeping all day today, too. That's why I'm updating my blog at 3 in the morning.

The Portacath worked great!

Today was the first day that I got to use the portacath. It is still a poke in the skin so it's not totally painless, but it's not as bad as getting the IV in the arm. The best thing is that it was *really* nice to be able to move my arms freely (something I couldn't do when the IV is in the arm). I'm really glad I decided to get the portacath. I asked Suzanne (one of the nurses) to start my drip in my portacath. She's a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat like me and I told her that I thought it was appropriate for her to make me a real bleeding heart!
(Somewhere in Texas, there is a village that is missing it's idiot!)

More test results in

Dr. Letzer said that the second opinion came back from the University of Michigan Medical Center and they confirmed everything that the Borgess labs and Mayo clinic said (yes, it's Lymphoma). Dr. Letzer also got the test results back from the PET scan and it showed the cancer in places that the CAT scan did not show. He said that it showed the cancer on my head, a small spot in my stomach, and also some on my liver. So I guess it truly is (was) widespread. So I am glad that I got started on the treatments when I did. Dr. Letzer says that he is confident that the Rituxan is melting away the cancer everywhere in my body. (We are still waiting for biopsy results for the cyst that I had removed from my leg).

What is remission?

Since the doctor feels that this is currently incurable, the goal is remission. He said that the "official" benchmark for remission is "reduction in the size of the tumor of more than 50%." He estimated that my tumor has been reduced by approximately 80%, so based on that benchmark, I'm already in remission!! Wow! So now his goal is "total remission" which means that no evidence of the cancer is visible at all! Good goal, don't you think?! I asked if that means he would take another bone marrow test. He said that he didn't want to put me through that again, but that it was an option.

Good News

The best news of the day was that Dr. Letzer said that instead of eight doses of Rituxan, he thinks that I will only need four! That means that after Wednesday, I will be half-done with my treatments! Woo hoo! Then I will need to take four maintenance doses every six months. I'm hoping that I will be able to go at a higher drip rate for those.

Thank you for your continued prayers. Pray for total remission and then some. Like I've said before, "I have a great doctor, but he's not God". I have every confidence that Dr. Letzer and Rituxan can get me into total remission in the next 2 weeks. But I know that only God can wipe the cancer from my body forever. That is my prayer, because then everyone will know that God cured my cancer and God gets all the glory. And if that is not His will, then I pray that God will give me peace with my condition and grant me a long-lasting remission.

Peace,

Dick

posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/22/2004 03:17:42 AM

Second Treatment (Day 2)

I was right: it only took 1/2 a day to finish up the dose. Sherry dropped me off at the doctors and ran errands while I finished up the dose. I was out by noon. Again, I can see very visible improvements. I have updated [my Lymphoma photo page](#) so that you can see the progress. The morning went by quickly and I chatted with some of the other patients who were getting chemotherapy. Some of these people have been doing this for years and years. I almost feel guilty about having such a quick recovery. I found myself praying for them while I'm getting my treatment.

Tonight another lady from [my church](#) brought a meal to my house. It was delicious. My church family has been an incredible source of support and prayers. I am so blessed by this community of believers.

I have only two more treatments to go. My next treatment will be on Monday. Please continue to pray for this disease to just go away. Only God can make that happen. So prayers are critical.

Peace,

Dick

Friday, December 24, 2004

A Very Merry Christmas

Yesterday afternoon, the dermatologist's office called and said that they received the lab results for the cyst removed from my leg last week. It was totally benign. Yea!! Praise God!

People see me and ask "how are you feeling?" I feel great. I feel healthy and I feel so totally blessed. But just because I'm in remission, please don't take me off your prayer list. I still have two treatments to go and my goals now are for a cure or at least 100% remission.

Do you want to help?

I've had several say if there is *anything* I can do, let me know. I always say thank you and sincerely wish that there was some way that I could let them help. Then it dawned on my last night, there is something that you *can* do.

There are two ways that my lymphoma will be cured (not just in remission -- actually cured).

1. I could be miraculously cured through the grace of God.
2. Research scientists could find a cure for lymphoma (ok, you could argue that they will only find a cure with God's grace, but let's not split hairs).

The point is, (ok, I'm getting way out of my comfort zone, here) there are scientists working everyday to find a cure for lymphoma. Research requires funding. If you want to help, you can [make a donation](#) to help fund those scientists. Maybe they will find a cure for *my* lymphoma. The [Lymphoma Research Foundation](#) has been a great source of information for me -- and their website was recommended by my doctor. I think that they are a reputable organization. [This link](#) will take you to their donation page. Please do **not** send me money! That's not what this is about at all. Some of you have asked how you can help. This is a way that you can help. Prayers are another way that you can help (and they don't cost anything).

A Very Merry Christmas

The day after I was diagnosed, I had band practice at [church](#). I told the band and the praise singers about my diagnosis. I said that one of my first goals was to be able to play for our Christmas Eve services. Every year, we have 3 services at 5 pm, 7 pm, and 9 pm. I really love playing on Christmas Eve. Well, I am going to meet my goal. And like everything else, my cup runeth over. When we do Silent Night (which is always cool at Southridge), I will be leading the congregation in singing (something I don't get to do often) while playing guitar. I will even get to play guitar and harmonica (yes, at the same time) which is a whole lot of fun for me.

Christmas Eve at Southridge is always a wonderful time of worship. Even if you "don't do the God thing" as one friend put it, it is a free evening of great Christmas

entertainment for the whole family. So come to Southridge tonight and have a very Merry Christmas.

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

"Glory to God in the highest,

And on earth peace, goodwill toward men! ([Luke 2:8-14](#))

[God Bless us](#), Everyone!

posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/24/2004 11:08:53 AM

Tuesday, December 28, 2004

Third Treatment

It's getting better all the time! I finished my third treatment today. (check out the [updated photo page](#)). The treatment did take a day and half. But it wasn't because your prayers didn't work. I chickened out.. well sorta... let me explain: I asked the doctor if we could increase the drip-rate so that I could get done in a day. He said that it was my choice, but he wanted me to be aware of the risks involved (namely another allergic reaction like I had with my [first treatment](#)). As I looked around the room, the nurses were very busy; Sherry did not sit with me all day today, so I didn't have my personal advocate there to alert the nurses if I started having a reaction. But mostly, I looked around the room at the other people going through chemo treatments that were much harder than my treatments. Many of them have been "dancing with the beast" for 6, 7, or more years. So I don't know if was fear of another reaction, or what. But I figured if my biggest complaint with my treatments was that it was just inconvenient, I should just shut my mouth and count my blessings. So we bumped it up very little (from 18 to 20) and I spent a lot of time praying for the others in the room.

Christmas Eve

We had 3 services on Christmas Eve. I got to play my guitar and harmonica and I lead the congregation in singing "Silent Night". I think I was able to create quiet moment in which they could feel Christ's presence (which, after all, is the goal of everyone performing in church). Several people approached me afterwards and said that it was their favorite part of the service. That was nice to hear. But mostly, it was good to feel used.

The Power of Prayer

It is amazing for me to hear how many people are praying for me. If you are praying for me, thank you!! Every day, somebody tells me that they've been reading my blog. I know

that it is reaching church-goers and non-church-goers - that's really cool. A pastor at a friend's church used me as an example of somebody who prays boldly. I honestly never thought I'd be used as a Christian example of anything (except maybe the "before" picture!). But I really do believe in the power of prayer and the phenomenal success that I've been having with my treatments has really driven it home for me. It is amazing to think that all power that it took to create the planet and everything in it -- all that power is at my disposal. But it takes prayer to make it happen ([2 Corinthians 1:9-11](#)) my prayers and yours. So I really do thank you for your prayers from the bottom of my heart.

What's Next?

I've got only one treatment left (next Monday ... and Tuesday). Tomorrow I'm going to work for the first time in almost 3 weeks. It feels good to be able to go back to work. My current client has been extremely flexible and understanding -- yet another blessing for me!

As always, my prayer is for 100% remission and more: to be cured. Lord, please: Remove the cancer completely. (I'm hoping that He reads my blog everyday, too!)

posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/28/2004 11:08:22 PM

Sunday, January 02, 2005

Approaching Normal

Life is starting to calm down a bit. I had 3 successful days at work last week. Saturday, I was able to spend time with my kids for the first time in about 3 weeks. We celebrated Christmas. My ex-wife has been very generous in taking the kids when I couldn't because of my appointments for treatment or for diagnostic testing or surgeries (and the regular custody schedule). It was hard to not see them for so long. Hard for me and hard for them, too I think. I told somebody the other day, if I had to choose between getting divorced or getting lymphoma, I'd pick lymphoma. There's just no two ways about it: divorce sucks.

But the kids and I had a good Christmas celebration. We all enjoyed our gifts and (finally!) Sherry and I are starting to feel like this runaway train we've been riding is starting to slow down. I have my final treatment on Monday and I will finish it up on Tuesday. The doctor had originally told me that I was going to need eight treatments, but after the second one -- when he saw how well it was responding to the Rituxan -- he said that I'd only need four. (Woo woo! Praise God for that!).

I'm finding myself quite anxious to get the last treatment so that I can try to put this chapter of my life behind me. It's a funny feeling to catch yourself praying for uneventful days.

I've still got a little pinkish hue on my head. Please pray that my treatment goes uneventfully (see... there I go again!). Pray for my complexion to return to normal. If it doesn't, I'll just tell people "See where God whacked me with a 2 x 4?" :-)

Most of all pray for this cancer to totally leave my body. May this "incurable disease" be miraculously cured by the only one who can cure it (God). And may this cure be a testimony to His unending power and His unfailing grace. May He get all the credit and glory for the cure. May the doctors and lab technicians be perplexed and confused until eventually the only explanation becomes so obvious: the only way my cancer could have been so totally wiped out was because of Divine Intervention -- "the only explanation is ... God!"

Oh wouldn't that just be so cool?!! Our God is an awesome God! All things are possible with God!

Peace,

Dick

posted by Dick Donohue @ 1/02/2005 06:31:27 AM

Tuesday, January 04, 2005

Fourth Treatment - The Saga Continues

I finished my fourth treatment today. It went fine. It was really boring, but at least there were no allergic reactions and it took all day Monday and a couple of hours today to finish it. I was really hoping that by now, the Rituxan would have melted away all traces of the lymphoma. But you can tell from [my updated photos](#), that that is not the case.

I met with Dr. Letzer today and he indicated that we should try to get as much out of the Rituxan as we can and see if we can get 100% remission (no trace of the lymphoma). So I am going to need another 4 doses of Rituxan (one a week on Mondays). I was able to set the drip rate to 22, which is the highest it has been. Since I have to get four more, I think that we will try to increase the drip rate so that I can get done in a day. After the next four treatments, we will wait a month. Apparently, the Rituxan keeps working -- sorta like a microwave oven that keeps cooking when it's off, I guess. Then I'll get another CAT scan to see if we got it all. If the Rituxan gets rid of everything, then we're good. If it doesn't, then (based on the CAT scan results) we'll need to look at radiation or chemotherapy. Neither of those sounds appealing to me.

I have to admit that I was disappointed to have to go through more treatments. It's times like this when I have to lean hard on my faith. I know that God is watching over me. But my head has to work overtime to convince my heart that things will be ok.

Please continue to pray for me. Take about 20 seconds right now: close your eyes and pray for me. Pray for strength and pray for a cure. I'd really appreciate it. Thanks.

Dick

PS. Since some of the comments made in my blog were political or otherwise inappropriate, I've disabled the ability to comment on my blog. Sorry. If you want to make a comment, please feel free to [email me](#).

posted by Dick Donohue @ 1/04/2005 05:46:06 PM

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Tuesday, January 11, 2005

Treatment # 5 - In ONE DAY!

I did it! Praise God! I got through my treatment in a single day! Woo hoo!

I figured as long as I have to go through 4 more treatments, I would try one more time to see if I could get the whole dose in a single day. (Remember that the first time I tried this I had a pretty severe allergic reaction). So yesterday, I attacked the problem with two-fisted approach: prayer and trust. I prayed a lot before I went in; and I decided that I would trust that God would let me accomplish this goal. When I was at the doctor's office. I wrapped my prayer shawl around me and prayed a lot (a lot!).

We started like usual with a drip rate of 12 ml/hr (50 is what most folks do - the first time I did this, I started getting a reaction at 24 and have been going at 18). Then we kicked it up to 20; then 22. Before we went to 24, I started getting this feeling that I should ask for another Benadryl. So I did. Then we set the drip rate to 24.... Then 27...Then 30!... And for the last half-hour it was going at 33! I finished in just over 8 hours and never had any type of allergic reaction at all! I was pretty happy about that. Praise God.

Web site down

My web site went down for "technical difficulties" for a few days. I was having trouble with the domain name ("dickdonohue.com"). It has been a big inconvenience and a hassle. Sometimes, I think the Amish got it right: you never hear them complain about their domain names or their email! Another way to look at it is that maybe Satan works hardest where he has the most to lose! I'd like to think that my blog is not helping his cause.

At any rate, if you can read this, then the web site "dickdonohue.com" lives again and I'm glad that you are checking up with me. I apologize for the downtime. I know that it got some of you worried. I'm fine. The site going down was not connected to comments made or to my health.

Progress?

I've posted [new pictures](#) of my head where the tumor was. You can't notice it now unless I point it out. But I certainly am starting to get diminishing returns from the Rituxan. Of course, I don't know what the cancer looks like on the inside. The CAT and PET scans showed that I had cancer in my abdomen, on my liver and in my neck. So maybe the drug

is focusing there, now. Who knows?

My next treatment will be on Monday. I'm praying that these next three Rituxan treatments put the cancer into 100% remission. If they don't then we are looking at other options. Those include chemotherapy, or radiation, or some other options that may/may not be covered by insurance. The Rituxan treatments have been really easy to take (relatively speaking). I really don't want to have to consider the options. And, as always, I'm praying that God will just take the cancer out of my body forever - cure me.

Peace,
Dick

posted by Dick Donohue @ 1/11/2005 04:14:17 PM

Tuesday, January 18, 2005

Treatment Number Six

Well, I've been pushing to complete the treatment faster. The risk in going faster is the possibility of having an allergic reaction (that's a bad thing). Up until last week, I was taking it at about 18 ml/hour. Last week, for the first time, I finished in a single day and had increased the drip rate to 33/hour. This week, we started at 12, then 20, then 25... 30, 33, 36, 40, 45, and I finished of the last hour and a half at 50!! Woo hoo!! I was out of the doctor's office by 2:30 pm.!! I spent the afternoon with my beautiful wife and best friend, Sherry. It was great.

Web Site

The web site has been up and down all week. I've been working with the web-hosting company. I think they've finally fixed it. It has actually managed to stay up most of today. Say a prayer there.

What's Next?

I have a treatment next Monday (Jan 24) and then I'm taking a week off from treatments. Then I get my last treatment of Rituxan on February 7. Then we wait a month and get another CAT scan on March 8. It will take a few days to get the results, so I go in to see the doctor the following week. We got three possibilities with this CAT scan.

1. Everything is gone. If this happens, then I'm done for 6 months and I will just get a maintenance dose of Rituxan every 6 months or so.
2. It's still there, but it's only showing in one place. If this happens, then I will most likely need radiation on that one place.
3. It's still there, and it's still in more than one place in my body. This is the least desirable outcome. If this happens, then we need to look at other treatment methods which include chemotherapy (barfing, losing hair, etc.), chemo and radiation, or something else.??)

Hopefully, it will be gone, gone, gone. Please pray for that.

What's with the Week Off?

I'm very excited about the week off. Before all this lymphoma crud entered my life, I took a giant leap of faith and signed up for a 2-day long Harmonica Soloing Workshop. It will be in Anaheim, California. I believe that playing harmonica is a wonderful gift that God has given me and I want to make the most of it. Again, to give Him the glory. Imagine if somebody gave you a brand new car as a gift and said just be sure that people know that I gave it to you. It wouldn't be right to not wash or tune up the car. In the same way, I don't think that it would be right to not to develop my harmonica skills.

After the harmonica conference, I will go stay with my Dad for a few days. He lives in nearby Mission Viejo. I love my Dad. We get along great. (Plus, it will be really nice to get out of this bitter cold Michigan weather that we've been having lately!)

Unfailing Support

Here it is: 8 weeks after I got my diagnosis and I am still getting supportive cards, and emails from friends and neighbors in my church family. If you are reading this and you are one of those many, many people who is praying for me regularly, I can't begin to express how much that means to me. I honestly don't know how people make it without faith and without the support of a loving, caring church family. Thank you!! And remember, pray for the cancer to disappear -- not just remission, but gone completely. The doctors will be baffled, but the Christians will all have a great big smug grin on our faces. We [know](#) who the greatest healer of all time is!

posted by Dick Donohue @ 1/18/2005 04:23:07 PM

Monday, January 24, 2005

Treatment Seven

My seventh treatment was pretty uneventful -- which is a blessing. Again, I was able to finish in record time. This time I was done in only 5 hours. I'd like to say that I went out and made the most of the afternoon, but I'm usually pretty tired afterwards and today was no exception. So after sitting around and sleeping all morning at the doctor's office, I came home and sat around and slept. (Mr. Excitement -- that's me!).

The [latest pictures](#) show that it's starting to fade. But I only have one more treatment to go. It's easy to be scared. To start thinking that the one more treatment won't be enough and I'll need chemo. I really don't want chemo. Chemo mean being nauseous, losing my hair, feeling crap and worrying about getting sick because my immune system is diminished. But then I catch myself. Every time an angel shows up in the bible, what's the first thing they say? "Fear not!" or "don't be afraid" or something like that. Trusting in God means that I don't have to fear the future. Even if I do need chemo, it's not something I need to fear. God has taken pretty good care of me so far. I'm just gonna have

to trust that He will continue to take care of me. After all, [He said that He would](#).

What's Next?

This weekend I will be going to a [2-day harmonica soloing workshop](#) in California. I'm very excited. I signed up for this many months ago. There is only room for 20 participants and I got in! Afterwards, I get to spend 3-4 days with my Dad who lives in southern California. That means that I'm going to skip a week for my treatment. My "last" treatment will be in on February 7th. Please pray that the sun and warmth helps to melt away the cancer and that I learn lots.

Peace,

Dick

posted by Dick Donohue @ 1/24/2005 11:21:57 PM

Saturday, February 05, 2005

California!

Harmonica Workshop

I'm back from my trip to California. I had an absolutely wonderful time. The first two days I was there, I attended a workshop on harmonica soloing. I had a great time. It was nice to find out that there were at least 20 other guys who play harmonica while driving the car! I wasn't the best harp player there, but I wasn't the worst and that was pretty affirming. I met some great guys and most importantly, I learned a lot! I also learned how much more I need to learn about playing harmonica! That's a good thing. I am really glad I went. They took pictures during the workshop and my picture and testimonial made it to the [harmonica workshop website](#). *(In the group photo, I'm the 4th from the left - gray shirt. (I need a new haircut so badly!) I made it to two other pictures. See if you can spot me!).*

Time with my Dad

If this lymphoma adventure has shown me anything, it has shown me that there is no better use of your time than to spend time with those you love and those who love you. After the harmonica workshop, I spent about 4 days with my dad. That was great. I watched him teach (he teaches at University of California, Irvine). I helped him with his computer, I ate authentic Mexican food and enjoyed the warm California weather. The highlight was when Dad and I (just the two of us) went to the beach by San Juan Capistrano and watched the sunset on the ocean.



It was beautiful. Here's a picture I took. I had a great time in California, but I really missed my wife and it was great to be back in her arms again.

Request for Extra Prayers

While I was in California, I got word that my brother was in the hospital and they thought

it was a heart attack. Thank God it wasn't! Paul's home now, but he needs to make some lifestyle changes. And that will be hard. Also, when I got home I found out that my Aunt Joyce was diagnosed with a brain tumor and the doctors said that they will take it one day at a time. Joyce has been battling other types of cancer. Please pray for them both.

Monday, Monday

I get my "last" treatment on Monday. Then we wait a month, get a CT scan and see what is left. My prayer is that they find nothing. My expectation is that they will. But my [hope is in the Lord](#).

posted by Dick Donohue @ 2/05/2005 01:36:00 PM

Tuesday, February 08, 2005

I'm DONE!

Put a toothpick in me it'll come out clean 'cause I'm DONE! Woo hoo!

I had my "last" treatment yesterday. It was rather uneventful and that's a good thing. Again, we kept kicking up the drip rate. I was getting my Rituxan at 87 mg/hour when I finished in about 4 1/2 hours! That's the fastest I have ever taken that medicine. I don't have to have any more treatments for at least a month (probably not for 6 months). Dr. Letzer said that the Rituxan will keep working over next 30-60 days. After a month I will get a CT scan and we will see what is left. Two months from now I'll get another PET scan. When I was first diagnosed, they found cancer in the lymph nodes in my abdomen, on my liver, and under my jaw -- and of course that big ugly tumor on my head. The tumor on my head is now nothing more than a slight coloration in my skin [Here's the latest pictures](#). If you were not looking for it, you wouldn't even notice it. Dr. Letzer said that we should expect the same amount of reduction everywhere in my body.

I say it is my "last" (in quotes) treatment because, according to the doctor, I will never be done with treatments. My cancer is currently incurable. Even if the cancer doesn't show up again, I will still undergo "maintenance therapy" every 6 months just to keep it scared away. That means 4 weekly doses of Rituxan every 6 months. I will keep the porta-cath in me for the rest of my life. So this truly is a life-changing diagnosis.

Blog Status

As you may have noticed, my blog updates have been less frequent. This trend will continue. I thank you for your support and prayers. I've had people all over the world praying for me and I can't thank you enough. Feel free to continue to check out my web-site. I've been toying with the idea of putting my blog content in a more sequential format. Right now, it's a little like reading an email trail.

Reflections

As I look back on what I've gone through in the last 2 months, I've come to some conclusions.

- ≡ The best use of your time is to spend it with those you love and those who love you.
- ≡ Everybody works too much. Work is not something that should define you. For me, it has become something that funds my ministries as a husband, a father, a musician, a son, a brother, etc.
- ≡ I don't know how anybody could endure a life-threatening diagnosis without solid faith in Jesus Christ. For the Christian, death is not something to fear.
- ≡ I am so blessed by my church family. The folks at [Southridge](#) have been so supportive; here I am 8 weeks after my diagnosis and I am *still* getting cards and letters of support and prayers from my church family. If you don't have a great church family, please consider being part of mine.
- ≡ There is no earthly value that you can put on a loving, supportive, faithful wife. There is no greater feeling than feeling unconditionally loved.
- ≡ I am blessed. I am so richly blessed. [My cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all of my days, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.](#)

Thank you. Peace,

Dick

posted by Dick Donohue @ 2/08/2005 08:15:24 AM

Tuesday, March 15, 2005

CAT Scan Results

I had a CAT scan last week Tuesday and went to the oncologist for the results today. I was surprised by how apprehensive I was before seeing the doctor. It doesn't make sense. I pretty much knew that it would be good news. I mean, if I had some huge new growth, the doctor wouldn't say "aw.. it can wait until Tuesday". So I knew that when I hadn't heard anything by Friday, I was pretty sure it would be good news. So I'm not sure why I was nervous.

It was Mark Twain who said, "I have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened." And so it was for me: Dr. Letzer said that "everything looks fine". Once again, I am blessed beyond my worth.

What's Next?

I was scheduled to get a PET scan a month from now, but Dr. Letzer said that he thinks that an MRI would be more conclusive. So in a month, I will get an MRI. I've never had one before, so that should be interesting. I also will need to go to the oncologist once a month to get my porta-cath flushed. That only takes about 5 minutes, so that's not a big deal.

The months of June and December will never be the same again for me. That's when I go for my maintenance doses of Rituxan. I will need to get 4 treatments (one per week) every 6 months. They tell me that these maintenance doses extend the amount of time that I will stay in remission. That's the name of the game now.

I asked Dr. Letzer how long he thinks I'll be in remission. He waved his hands around like he was reading some crystal ball. He said that he's had some patients stay in remission only 3 months. On the other end of the spectrum, he has a patient who has been in remission for 10 years and still going. He says that the average is between 2-3 years.

Blog Status

Unless I drop out of remission in the next month or two, I don't expect to update my blog until June when I get more treatments.

Thank You!!

I'd like to thank all of my dedicated blog readers. Many of you have prayed for me, sent cards and emails with words of encouragement. They have sustained me. Without them, I think that my outlook would be dramatically different. Most of all, I'd like to thank Jesus. I'm not sure if He reads blogs. But I know that, through him, I have been given a promise of immortality. When you know that you have that promise, no disease -- not even one as scary sounding as Follicular B-Cell Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma -- nothing on earth can diminish your spirit. To me, this is the key to beating cancer.

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters;
He restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,
for You are with me; Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in
the house of the LORD
Forever!!

posted by Dick Donohue @ 3/15/2005 11:15:00 PM

Thursday, May 05, 2005

A New Diagnosis

Darn Computers!

Ok, I have to admit that I had written the results of my MRI and a bunch more, but when I went to save it, I got some kind of error and lost everything I had written. It made me mad and I didn't want to rewrite it. However, some of you are still checking up on me -- which is totally humbling and awesome. So here's an update sooner than I had expected.

MRI Results

The MRI came back great. There are no tumors in my abdomen, no tumors on my liver, no detectable tumors anywhere. I still have a very slight discoloration on my head -- just to remind me that Mr. Lymphoma has moved in for good. But, for the most part I feel healthy and if you didn't know I had cancer, you wouldn't be able to tell. Every day I get up and I'm thankful for the gift of another day. It's another day to tell my wife I love her, another day to be my kids' father, another day to sing and play music, another day to pray to Jesus and ask for another day tomorrow.

A New Diagnosis

I've always felt that Satan works hardest when he has the most to lose. Well, let me tell ya: God must have some pretty big plans for me, 'cause Satan ain't giving up yet. One of the blood tests taken at the oncologist showed some elevated liver enzymes. When my primary care physician saw that, he ordered more blood tests. One of them was a blood sugar test. The normal range for blood sugar is 70-110. Anything over 126 is considered diabetes. Mine came back at 152. So ...I have Type 2 Diabetes.

The diabetes is not caused or related to the lymphoma at all (at least I don't think it is). It has everything to do with the fact that I'm way overweight and never exercise (unless you count jumping to conclusions!) But here's the really ironic part: if the Rituxan medicine that I was given for my lymphoma didn't work, I would have had to go through chemotherapy. Then I'd get sick, barf a lot, lose a bunch of weight and I would have probably avoided getting diabetes. However, there are cheaper and easier diet plans than chemotherapy!

Fortunately, I won't have to take insulin (yet) and my doctor thinks that it can be controlled with diet and exercise. The doctor says that he'd like me to lose about 50 pounds. :-(

A New Lifestyle

Now if I was somebody that actually believed in "coincidence", I'd be amazed that the same day that I got the diagnosis of diabetes was the same day that workmen started working on remodeling our bathrooms. You see, while they are gutting the bathrooms, we won't have a shower at home. So Sherry had obtained a temporary membership to the YMCA so that I could get up every morning, drive to the YMCA and take a shower. So as long as I'm getting up earlier and going to the YMCA anyway... I might as well

exercise. Wow the timing of that is quite a coincidence! (Yea, right!) I know that, despite the Devil's worst intentions, God is watching out for me. So I've been going to the Y' practically every day - trying to take care of my body. And I started a new diet:

South Beached Whale

My doctor recommended that I try the "South Beach Diet". So I bought the book (and I bought the book on CD, too). The first two weeks is supposed to be very low-carb (very Atkins-like). After that, you can start adding carbs. They claimed that I would lose between 8-13 pounds in the first two weeks and that most of it would come from my belly first. Even though I love bread, ice cream, and fruit, I was up for the challenge!! After hearing/reading the book, I dove head-first into the South Beach Diet.

After 10 days of faithful carb-denial, I went back to the doctor's office (for something unrelated) and weighed in again. I have lost (are you ready for this?) I have lost a whopping one (1) pound. There's an old joke about this fat guy who wants to lie on the beach, but can't because people keep pushing him back into the water....that'd be me: The South Beached Whale. I've given up on the diet and I'm going to just try to eat sensible, reduce portion size and continue to exercise at the YMCA. I'm going to try to err on the side of common sense.

Disruption

Another irony is that the diabetes has been more of a disruption to my daily life than the lymphoma was/is. With lymphoma, there's nothing anybody else can do for me, but sit and watch. But the diabetes diagnosis affects what I eat. But I don't eat alone. I can't expect everybody in the family to start eating differently just because **I'm** diabetic. So trying to decide "what's for dinner?" has been quite a challenge lately. It's a little easier now that I've given up on the no-carb diet. My poor mother in Florida (bless her heart) is beside herself because of the diabetes. She's mailed and emailed all kinds of diabetes information, she even sent me some vitamin supplements. I know she feels kinda helpless because she's not right here. I know how she feels: I wish I could be there to help her, too. I guess we just have to give it all up to God. It's been a pretty good plan for me so far.

So other than the thyroid problems, my attention deficit disorder, the lymphoma, and diabetes, I'm as healthy as a horse! I can't take on all the stress that comes with that, so I give it to Jesus. I pray that I stay healthy and try to remain thankful for all the blessings that I have - like people like you who care enough about me to keep reading my blog! Thanks! If you are the praying type, I would appreciate prayers for me, my mom, and my family. If you're not the praying type, warm thoughts would be fine (but please consider switching teams).

Love,
Dick

posted by Dick Donohue @ 5/05/2005 11:06:00 PM

Thursday, June 09, 2005

Six Months Later

It is amazing to think that it has been just over six months since the first diagnosis. Just today, a friend at work noted that "you can't even see where it was. You used to have a faint red spot where it was, but now you can't even see that!" No doubt about it, I'm here by the grace of God.

The Monday Maintenance Man

On Monday, I had my first maintenance treatment of Rituxan. This is another dose just to keep the beast scared away. I will get a treatment/dose of this every Monday in June. I thought for sure that I was going to have another horrible allergic reaction (like I did with my first treatment), but it never happened. Next week, we are going to kick up the rate faster than before - hopefully I can get out earlier. One thing that was the same was that I'm just whipped after getting the treatment. It could be because of the Rituxan, but I suspect that it is because of the Benedryl and Tylenol that they give me to counter any allergic reactions. I passed out on the couch Monday night at about 8:00 pm!

I don't know when I'll get another CAT scan or MRI. I'm supposed to see the oncologist once every three months, so maybe then. But at this point, there are no signs of problems; and I thank God for every day that I am in remission.

Diabetes progress

After a very disappointing attempt at the South Beach Diet, I decided to make up my own plan. Actually, I can't really take credit for it. I'm basically trying to follow some common sense and biblical principles. I try to follow my "God-Given Guideline": if God made it, it's ok to eat. For example, God made strawberries, but not strawberry Twizzlers. Beyond that, I keep in mind that there is a difference between living and just being alive. A pizza now and then won't kill me. Beyond that, I just try to eat low-fat, low-carb, smaller portions, drink a lot of water, and get some exercise (although lately, the only exercise I've been getting is jumping to conclusions and running off at the mouth!)

At any rate, it seems to be working. When I weighed in at the oncologist's office on Monday, they told me I've lost 8 pounds since March. I'm ok with that. I guess ultimately, a successful diet is just the triumph of mind over platter. :-)

As always, I appreciate prayers for my continued health. I celebrated my daughter's eleventh birthday this past week. In a moment of silence I reflected on the possibility that if my lymphoma had not been treated, I might not have had this opportunity. Thank God I was there.

Live Well, , Laugh Often, Love Much

posted by Dick Donohue @ 6/09/2005 12:30:00 AM

Tuesday, June 14, 2005

Maintenance Treatment - Maximum Speed!

Well, I finished my second maintenance dose. This time, we started at 25cc/hour. By the time I was done, I had been getting it at 100cc/hour! So I was in and out in about 2 hours!! That is, by far, the fastest I've ever taken it. That's a good thing!! I wasn't as drowsy as I was last time either -- I think it really is the Benedryl. I only had about 25mg this time and was a little groggy from it.

Here's the thing that made my day: I saw Doctor Letzer (my oncologist) in the hall and asked him when I was due for another scan. He took a look at my chart and said, probably not until next spring (12 months after the last one)! He said, "I'd be really surprised if you have any problems between now and then!" Woo hoo. God is good!! All the time!!

posted by Dick Donohue @ 6/14/2005 12:30:00 AM

Friday, December 09, 2005

Allergic Reaction number 2

Wow! It really has been a long time since I've written in my blog. I didn't even finish writing about my treatments in June! That's how uneventful they were, I guess. But as a friend recently told me she figured "no news is good news". In this case, that is exactly right. I have been healthy since my last entry -- Thank God. (no, really... thank Him!)

It has been just over a year since I was diagnosed with Follicular B-cell Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. It is still (currently) incurable. Because it is not curable, the course of action is to beat it into remission for as long as possible. One part of that process is regular maintenance doses of Rituxan. "Regular" in this case means every 6 months I get four more doses of this wonder drug.

I have mixed feelings about it. Deep inside, I know that this drug (which, I'm told costs over \$4,000 per dose) is messing me up. Everybody tells me that there is no link between the drug and my Type II diabetes. But I just can't think that it is coincidence that I was diagnosed with diabetes just over a month after getting 8 doses of Rituxan. Still, I can't deny that the Rituxan has kicked the Lymphoma into remission in a very short time (2 weeks). And I never got sick, I never lost hair, and I'm still here. Those are huge benefits. For now, the benefits outweigh all the drawbacks of which I am aware.

So this past Tuesday I went in for my first of four maintenance doses of Rituxan. I was hoping that they'd just kick it in and start me at 100cc/hour. No way. The nurses said that they always start out slow if the patient hasn't been in for a while. They said that they didn't want to have me going through another allergic reaction like the one I had in my very first treatment.

Even so, I did have an allergic reaction. They started out at 12cc/hour, then 24, then 36. When they kicked it up to 48, I could feel my sinuses swelling and I started getting a runny nose. I could also feel my face getting flushed. But it didn't advance as quickly as it did last year. So I quietly suggested that perhaps I should get another benadryl.

The nurse, Suzanne, looked at me and said "That's it! I'm stopping the drip!" "No", I protested. I didn't want to be there all day. (It's not that it's a bad place, but beside the employees, it was a place that nobody *wanted* to be. It was a place where emaciated, hairless people say things like "It wasn't such a bad week. I vomited only twice"). "You can protest all you want", the nurse said. "You're not having a reaction on *my* watch. And I don't care if Benadryl in the IV makes you drowsier, it makes it work faster, so that's what you are getting!".

You know, in some ways, a tough nurse can be one of the most loving people you'll ever meet!

I'm glad she got tough. It was exactly what I needed. The affect of the reaction was minimal. She took me off the drip for about 1/2 hour and then started me out at a lower dose. After that, we eased the drip rate up more slowly. I managed to get it back up to 60 and finished the dose in about 6 hours. I was a little congested, that was unpleasant. But it was certainly bearable. Especially when I'm sitting in a room where some people get a shot and it's downright painful going in.

Renewed Perspective

While I was there, an interesting thing happened to the guy in the chair next to me. He had had an EKG taken at the hospital, but apparently, they had lost it. One of the doctor's staff had been on the phone for hours, yelling at the hospital. I heard that, at one point, the hospital even hung up on her. Finally, the nurses came and informed him that he was going to have to go back to the hospital to get another EKG. The guy's wife and the nurses were livid! They even told him to be mean to the people at the hospital. That is was acceptable. It was a very interesting frenzy. And this guy just sat in the chair. He was as smooth as glass. He never even ruffled a feather. "Ok, I'll go. No big deal". I think his calmness made the people around him even angrier.

Herein lays the blessing of cancer: perspective. In the grand scheme of things, this was no big deal. It's just an EKG, for Pete's sake! It's not worth getting angry. This guy knew that. Life. Love. Compassion. Grace. These are the important things. Not lost EKG's.

What's next for me?

I go back for the remaining 3 doses each Tuesday in December. Then in February, I go in for what will become an annual CAT scan. I keep on living. Hopefully, I will keep on loving, showing compassion, and extending grace. I will [press on](#).

How 'bout you?

posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/09/2005 11:11:00 PM

Wednesday, December 14, 2005

Another great day

Well, the next treatment went significantly easier. They started me out at the "regular rate" which they said was 25cc/hour. After that, we kicked it up by 25 every 30 minutes. When we got to 75cc/hour, I could feel my lips tingling. So I asked them to keep it at that rate for a little while. The next time, we continued increasing the rate. So I got to 100cc/hour - which is "maximum velocity". They won't let it go faster than that. I was in at 9:00 and home by 1:30!

I talked with one of the nurses. She said that she had noticed one thing different from last week and this week: Last week, I didn't start with my prayer shawl. You see, about a year ago, some ladies from my church had knitted a "prayer shawl". It is a big, blue, extra-wide scarf that I wear while I am getting the treatments. They tell me that it was knitted with a prayer in every stitch. Last week, I didn't start with it on. This week, I did.

Now, I'm not saying that the prayer shawl alone is what made my treatment go easier. I know that there were people praying for me this week that didn't know I was starting treatments again. But it does remind me of the importance of praying before starting anything significant.

Paul reminded the Romans to "[Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.](#)" It really does make a difference!

Thanks to those of you who ask about my blog and read it. You make me feel special and remind me that the ripples in my life extend farther than I ever thought they would. :-)

posted by Dick Donohue @ 12/14/2005 03:27:00 AM

Update December 3, 2011 – Eight Years Since Diagnosis

Since my last blog entry, I have had a CAT scans every year. Every CAT scan has showed that I was in still in 100% remission (no evidence of any cancer). In 2006, I switched from getting 4 doses of Rituxan every 6 months to 1 dose of Rituxan every 3 months (1/2 the amount over the course of a year). After the 2008 CAT scan, I asked to stop taking Rituxan all-together. Dr. Letzer agreed. But I kept my porta-cath waiting for the inevitable return of “the beast”.

This past summer (2011), just before my 50th birthday, I finally decided that I am, by the grace of God, cured. Based on that decision, I finally had my port-a-cath removed. I have not taken any medication for my cancer for over 3 years.

When I was diagnosed in 2004, the American Cancer Society said that the 5 year survival rate for Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma was 56%. Today, it is 67%. I think I beat the odds and I give all the credit to God and his amazing grace. And I know that I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for the many people who prayed for me. I will be eternally grateful to you.