

Health Care in Crisis: Better Ways to Beat Cancer?

The American medical industry saves millions of lives every year. But its resistance to better ways to treat cancer may doom millions more

By Ed Wallace

Editor's Note: This is Part Five of a five-part series on the health-care crisis.

One fear that haunts everyone is that one day your doctor will say the five most chilling words a patient can hear: "I'm sorry, you have cancer." According to the American Cancer Society's Cancer Facts & Figures 2001, in that year an estimated 29,200 Americans were diagnosed with, and about 28,900 of them died from, pancreatic cancer. This is the story of one of the 300 "survivors."

Self-employed in the construction industry, for over 40 years, Ray Ellis built small car washes, graduating to full-service lube centers, full-service car washes, and dry-cleaning shops. As his and Henrietta's children grew up, they joined the family business, [Kwik Industries](#). Ray handled sales and contracts, eldest son Mike was in charge of construction, and younger son Phillip dealt with last-minute problems at the properties and handle sales of supplies to their customers. Daughter Raynette managed the office. Such was the Ellis family's reputation that when Costco ([COST](#)) decided to experiment with adding car washes at its store locations, it turned to Kwik Industries for the construction.

Mike Ellis grew up the strong, silent type; his integrity was unquestioned, and his sense of responsibility knew no limits. An accomplished multi-engine pilot, Mike also loved snow skiing, jogged eight miles four to five days a week, and had never smoked. His family often remarked that Mike seemed to embody the healthiest lifestyle possible. That was until 2001, when at the age of 45 he started having pain in his abdomen.

LIVER TUMORS

Never one to complain, he kept the pain to himself until it became unbearable. He consulted with a doctor of internal medicine and a gastroenterologist, who ordered numerous diagnostic tests and determined that surgery was required. The gastroenterologist, after performing a Whipple Procedure, or bile duct bypass, on Mike's pancreas in May 2002, had bad news for the Ellis family: He'd found tumors in Mike's pancreas, and so many tumors in his liver that he said he quit counting them at 100. In the doctor's opinion, Mike was, at best, living out his last 45 days.

Raynette and brother Phillip reached out to the best-known cancer centers across America, but the response was always the same. Initial rejection—because these cancers are almost always fast and fatal—but if Mike was still alive in six weeks they would look again at his case. Reporting back to the original gastroenterologist on their failed search for treatment, Mike's siblings were shocked by the physician's response: "If Mike were my son, I would get him on a plane to Germany for treatment right now." He then cautioned them never to use his name in conjunction with the recommendation—almost as if he were committing an act of medical heresy.

In June 2002, Mike Ellis was checked into the [Klinik St. Georg](#) in Bad Aibling, Germany, to undergo cancer treatments. The Klinik offers both conventional and alternative cancer therapies, including heat treatment and herbal supplements, that are not sanctioned by the American medical establishment. Scheduled to last four weeks, the treatment was cut short by an infection arising from his bile duct bypass surgery. The doctors asked that he return for a second series of treatments as soon as possible, once the infection had been cleared up. They also added that he had responded remarkably well and would probably survive. Ellis returned to Germany in October that year, and this time the doctors reported that the treatments had been successful: His cancer was in full remission. The total cost of his treatment at this point totaled a mere \$36,000. The Ellis family was surprised when Blue Cross of Texas covered his treatments in Germany.

Back in Dallas, a series of tests at University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center verified that Mike's cancer was, yes, really, in full remission. This event alone should have shaken the oncology industry in America to its very core.

TOTAL REMISSION

Here was a man in whom a doctor had confirmed two of the most lethal types of cancer. He had been given mere weeks to live; now, months after his medically forecast date with death had passed, oncologists in Dallas confirmed that his cancer was in total remission.

But total remission did not mean Mike Ellis was cured—and therein lies the primary misconception about cancer. The American Cancer Society defines cancer in its Facts & Figures publication as "a group of diseases characterized by uncontrolled growth and spread of abnormal cells" and describes the factors promoting this disease as both external and internal. Looking through statistical data on cancer, you'll often see the phrase "five-year survival rate;" this terminology is a clue that many current cancer treatments seem to be more effective at extending life than at curing the disease.

Certainly every year many people undergo cancer treatments and never have a recurrence of the disease again. But for many others the outcome is that the disease goes into a period of remission—followed by the cancer's return.

Mike Ellis would fall into the latter category. While he enjoyed a two-year period of remarkable health after his treatment in Germany, there was a relapse. At times he returned to Germany for further treatments; his doctor there said he had responded so well that, although Mike might have to return again in the future, the doctor could see no reason why he couldn't enjoy another 25 to 30 years of life. Still, any form of extended cancer treatments can be brutal, and in 2006 Mike opted to have radioactive beads inserted into his liver in Dallas rather than make another trip to Germany. From that day forward, Mike said that was the biggest mistake he had made in his ongoing treatments. He said he never felt "right" again.

SCAR TISSUE

The complications from his original bile duct operation continued to cause problems. Scar tissue built up in his abdomen, and there was severe liver dysfunction with the scarring, possibly from his stateside cancer radiation treatment. In June 2007, it became necessary to perform a gastric bypass, and only then did his health slide into its terminal stage. On Oct. 19, 2008, Steven Michael Ellis died. The cause of his death was pancreatitis, combined with renal failure and liver dysfunction caused by massive scar tissue—but not the cancer that was supposed to have taken his life six and a half years earlier.

In just the last two weeks of his life, Mike's hospital bills exceeded \$120,000. This does not include the cost of the original bile duct bypass, his radiation treatments in America, hospital stays from infections, or the numerous ongoing tests to check his cancer's remission. As a comparison, his cost of treatment in Germany, including all costs of his hospital stay, was just \$6,000 a week.

In its most recent fact sheet, the American Cancer Society estimated that 1,479,350 Americans will be diagnosed with cancer this year and 562,340 will die from the disease. However, 62% hasn't been the survival rate for the individuals I've known who have been diagnosed with and treated for cancer in the past decade. Of those I've known with cancer, possibly 62% of people have "survived" for five years...but not for six.

Still, for the past seven years, I have been waiting to tell the story of Mike Ellis' fight with cancer. I've also been waiting—ever since American oncologists verified to his family that Mike's pancreatic and liver cancer were in full remission after just six weeks of treatment and with just \$36,000 spent—for the medical industry to acknowledge the success of his treatment at the Klinik St. Georg in Germany. One would think that if we were truly serious about the war on cancer, there would have been a thorough investigation of the successful treatment he received. Instead, we received only silence from the very American oncologists who verified that Mike Ellis' cancer had gone into remission.

CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE

At his funeral, many members of Mike's construction crew came up to talk, eager to share how they had had no career or future until he had taken them under his wing and made them productive members of society. And even though they had been divorced for over 20 years, his ex-wife remarked, in front of her new husband and children, that she had lost her best friend in life.

Having lost so many personal friends to cancer, most recently legendary Texas car dealer Bill McDavid, I think maybe Mike's gift to us all is the fact that the Ellis family has finally allowed his story to be told in its entirety.

There is hope that we can win the war on cancer, but not until the industry is willing to look at all treatments in an unbiased way—until the best treatments, even at extremely low costs, are made the norm. But as a reminder, it was an American gastroenterologist who advised the Ellis family to take treatment in Germany. And he refuses to let his fellow practitioners know he did that to this day.

Ed Wallace is a recipient of the the Gerald R. Loeb Award for business journalism, given by the G. and R. Loeb Foundation, and is a member of the American Historical Society. His column leads the Fort Worth Star-Telegram's "Sunday Drive" section. He reviews new cars every Friday morning at 7:15 on Fox Four's Good Day, contributes articles to BusinessWeek Online, and hosts the top-rated talk show Wheels Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. on 570 KLIF.

