



Interview Transcript: Dave

Dave worked as a locomotive engineer for Canadian Pacific Rail. At the time of the interview, he was married and was a father and grandfather. Dave passed away in January 2010.

Type of Cancer: Lung

Year of Diagnosis: 2008

Treatment: Chemotherapy and Radiation

Date of Interview: July 2009

My name is Dave Spier and I live in a little village on the north shore of Lake Superior called Rosspoint, Ontario. I worked here most of my life as a locomotive engineer with Canadian Pacific Rail, and about a year ago I suddenly was brought on with some severe shortness of breath. I couldn't explain it. And we did an x-ray and discovered some masses in my chest. And it turned out that it was a lung cancer. And they determined that we could handle six weeks of radiation treatment along with 6 treatments of chemo, so it's been an all-winter ordeal—as a matter of fact, I just had my last chemotherapy treatment this past Monday.

Living in the North

The treatment for cancer is sometimes referred to as a full-time job. I can say that it's a job and a half when you live where I do because it's pretty difficult here in the north. I live some 200 km from where the treatment is actually performed. It's quite a distance to travel. That's just one way, so you figure 400 km both ways. This is a beautiful time of the year right now to travel that road between here and Thunder Bay, alongside Lake Superior.

But we turn it around and we make January that you have to travel this road and there's the black ice and there's all the pitfalls of winter. And although in the beginning I thought, "This is a piece of cake"—my first chemo treatments I was able to tolerate rather well and the first radiation treatments I could tolerate rather well. But I was driving myself back and forth this 400 km, and I could handle that, but the treatment proved to be cumulative. And then it got much, much more difficult as time went on. And it became apparent at one point that I could fall asleep while driving and I had to really, really watch myself very closely. And then had to come up with other methods of being able to get to and from the hospital in Thunder Bay because of the possibility of having an accident and not only injuring myself but maybe someone else. So it's all-consuming, it takes up your whole life and then some. You have to be very thankful to have some good people around you.

Decisions

It is a huge, huge shock in the beginning when you first discover this kind of thing. You feel like a life sentence, you feel like this... I'm getting closer to my next journey and what are we going to do? How do we solve—oh man, we've got tons of things we have to deal with: How long can

we live in our home? Do we need to sell it now? Do we need to move to be closer to the cancer centres? There are just an unbelievable amount of questions. And having a partner who can sit down with you and pragmatically go over all these subject matters. And when you need help, bring in help. If you need an expert in financial assistance, bring them in, call somebody up. Have your health-care team fully informed, have everyone fully informed. There's no reason for secrecy. It's foolish to be secretive about these kinds of things. And I'm not trying to say that you need to tell the world, but you need to tell those who are important to you and who can help you.

Be Your Own Advocate

I know full well what my capabilities are and I don't want to go beyond that. I want to... I will seek out the assistance that I need, and in some cases I can be downright demanding. I will really go after what I think is necessary for my well being, as well as those around me. Being one's own advocate is probably the most important—for me at any rate—the most important issue of the entire procedure.

I have learned that this is my body and it's my responsibility. So I believe strongly in advocacy. I believe strongly in taking charge of your own health care, and that means questioning all your medical people and clearly understanding what it is that they are talking about, and trying to learn as much as you can so that you can keep the process going in a positive fashion. And full well realizing what may look like something that would make life easier isn't necessarily the way to go. You might have to acquiesce to the experts, and there are good reasons why everybody says what they say, and you've got to listen.

Radiation Burns

In my case, the radiation burns that came out on my back were fairly severe and quite painful and they wouldn't allow me to sleep at night. Although we put cream on and things like that, it wasn't helpful. But I was visiting with the wound ostomy people in another hospital and I asked them to take a look at my back and within minutes they had the pain gone. So you soon learn that there are people who have specialty skills that can help you and you need to look out and seek out where those specialty skills lie. And I honestly believe... from the radiation oncologist, they were very pleased that I looked beyond them for help. They too are searching for help to be able to alleviate people's pain.

Flying by the Seat of My Pants

When I think about surprises, probably everything is a surprise because you're heading into an area of such little knowledge, at least for me. It's not an area that I had researched or had looked into before, and I know that I'm kind of flying by the seat of my pants and trying to learn as I go along. And it's so complicated that the learning curve is really huge. But I know... to be quite honest with you, I had two bad days when I first discovered that I had cancer. Two sleepless nights when I lay there and wondered about things like death, at the end of which I said, "This is a foolish waste of time," and I put it behind me and I haven't looked back since. I have no intentions of wasting any more time on negativities and all the so-called sorrowful things. I have nothing to be sorrowful about. I'm still alive and I'm still full of piss and vinegar and I'm just going to give 'er.

A Life-Changing Experience

There's no question that developing cancer will change a person. There's absolutely no

question about it at all. And I think that's part and parcel to probably the area that cancer and death sort of go together, or have for so many years. I know that's changing and that cancer is being beaten more and more all the time. But, at the same token, one has to be a little pragmatic with respect to the whole issue and knowing that there are some winners and some losers, and so... But I think you can be a winner and a loser, regardless, at the same time.

Oh yes, does it ever change your life. As I said, I just finished my last chemotherapy last Monday, just a couple of days ago. And who knows. Next year I might be going through the exact same thing all over again. And at this stage of the game I'm quite prepared to do that. How many times I'll be prepared to do that—I don't know whether or not it will wear me out in the end or whether or not we can eradicate it and become a cancer survivor. I am certainly looking forward to being a cancer survivor at this stage of my game.