Gaurav Udiyavar – A Desire to Create Awareness

Upon reflecting on his testicular cancer experience, Gaurav Udiyavar wants to spread more awareness.

April 6, 2022 By Justin Birckbichler

Welcome to the Band of Ballers! In this series on ABSOT, I'm turning over control to some other ballsy testicular cancer survivors and patients who have inspired me with their work in advocacy and awareness during and after their diagnosis. This month's feature is all about Gaurav Udiyavar, who shares his story and hopes to do more to raise awareness. Enjoy!

It started with an email – an email that would go on to save my life. It was the early 2000s. Teenagers flocking to cyber cafes to check their emails and to chat in yahoo chat rooms at lousy internet speeds was all the hype and not having a personal computer in my house, I was happy to get on board this train.

These were relatively early days of the internet in India. Being a teenager enrolled in my undergraduate program, I had all the time in the world to read those spam emails forwarded by unknown people (I guess I had time to do everything except actually study). You know the type of emails I am referring to – the "forward this to ten people and you might win a million bucks" or the "if you don't send this to five people you will have five years of bad luck" kinda garbage.

One such email forwarded by some unknown person that captured my attention, outlined how young men are vulnerable to testicular cancer and it also described in great length, how one can perform a physical self-check at regular intervals to look for any signs and symptoms of the disease. Out of the dozens of emails I read every day, the contents of that specific email deeply captured my attention and were inexplicably stored in the back of my mind.

Fast forward to 2006. I was now 21 and in the second year of my Master's program.

While performing the aforementioned routine self-examination in the shower (as I had been doing for a couple of years now), I felt a tiny, pea-shaped lump on the left testicle. My initial reaction was to be dismissive, attributing it to paranoia brought on by reading too much medical literature on the internet.

Another self-assessment the next morning revealed that the lump hadn't 'gone away' as I had hoped it would, and this made it clear that it wasn't my mind playing tricks on me. This was something real and I needed to get this looked at by a doctor. After a thorough examination, my GP recommended I do an Alpha Fetoprotein and a Beta HCG test (I will clarify the significance of this in due course).

Both these tests yielded a negative result. I vividly remember my doctor’s words: “Your tests are negative, and based on the location of the lump I do not believe this to be cancer. BUT, I am not God and I can be wrong. I recommend we schedule a surgery to get a biopsy done and we go from there”. I don’t know if this caution was a part of medical prudence or my doctor’s subjective call, but I am thankful he recommended this course of action.

I underwent surgery and the biopsy revealed that it was cancer.

More specifically, it was Stage 1 Classic/Pure Seminoma – a type of germ cell tumor I am told that doesn’t get detected in the Alpha Fetoprotein and Beta HCG tests, unlike most tumors. The surgeon had no option but to perform an orchiectomy of the left testicle.

Because it was detected at an early stage and because the surgeon (the same person as my original consulting doctor) was able to remove the tumor in its entirety during the surgery, he presented 3 follow-up treatment options to me. I could opt for a round of chemotherapy, I could opt for radiation therapy, or I could simply do nothing except surveillance (the wait and watch approach). I was told that seminomas react well to radiation and based on my doctor’s opinion, that is what I chose.

I was given a lower intensity course of 20 sittings of 40 grey each (grey being the measure of intensity). Over the next few years, I was required to do follow up tests and scans – every 3 months in the first three years, every 6 months in year 4 and 5 and once a year after that. By the grace of God, all of these tests over the years have come back normal.

In August 2021, I cracked open a bottle of some quality scotch to mark 15 years since my surgery.

This long and trying saga has been made a little more tolerable by some wonderful humans from the medical fraternity and their generosity. The doctor whom I initially consulted and who performed the surgery, was so incredibly generous – to the point that he did not charge me for some of the consultations. In me, he probably saw the scared 21 year old who, after the death of his father, grew up in a family with very limited financial means, and for whom every rupee was a luxury. Not only did he give me the medical treatment I needed, but he was also there to provide the necessary emotional support in addition to the support I received from my family.

The radiologist who would see me every 3 months when I would go for my follow up scans, would address me as her ‘beta’ (Hindi for son). During my final consultation with the radiation oncologist, he gave me some tips on how to put this trauma in the past and to focus on the future. I am truly overwhelmed by the authenticity and the generosity of all of these amazing souls.

However, I am also mindful that I have probably been more fortunate than the average cancer survivor.

My initial diagnosis was pretty early, which contributed to a fairly good prognosis. Not everyone is so fortunate. I also know of people whose diagnosis was fairly late, contributing to a much more challenging recovery journey and some of whom were sadly not able to make it.

Despite not being a medical expert by any stretch of the imagination, I do feel there is a gaping hole when it comes to awareness around men’s health. One conversation that comes to mind is my chat with another patient while waiting for my turn in the radiation oncology ward of the hospital. She was there as a part of her radiation therapy as well, and she started a casual conversation with me about why I am there, what sort of diagnosis I had and so on.

When I described the events that led to my diagnosis, she commented that she didn’t have much awareness of testicular cancer and that she certainly wasn’t aware of how self-examinations can be an effective method for early detection. If memory serves me, she said she had a son who was 15 at the time, and that she would narrate my story to him and her husband to encourage them to be on top of their own health.

This casual conversation had a profound impact on me and got me thinking about the number of people out there who are unaware of this issue.

The number of young men who are statistically at risk of testicular cancer and who may not have anyone in the family to warn them about it. The number of single-mother households like mine where there isn’t a father figure to openly discuss men’s health, and where despite her best efforts the mother may not have the knowledge or the resources to encompass this topic.

This conversation was a major factor that inspired me to share my story with others. I recognize that because this is a fairly sensitive and often distressing topic, there is a time and a place to share this and that I cannot go around randomly volunteering this information. However, when I do find myself in an opportune time and a place, I do not miss out on the opportunity to share my story. The last few years have been busy moving to a new country, settling down and working on building a career, but I do plan to engage in volunteer work around men’s health and particularly testicular cancer awareness in the near future.

I write this in the living memory of my friends Shreyas and Gopal. Gopal was a student and friend who lost his battle against testicular cancer. Shreyas was a friend for over 25 years and he lost his life to leukemia last year.

Be sure to connect with Gaurav by visiting him at https://m.facebook.com/gaurav.udiyavar or https://mobile.twitter.com/boringprofessor. Until next time, Carpe Scrotiem!

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