

FROM THE EDITORS

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TIMES

A Scientist — and Humanist

‘YOU’RE SCREWED.” With these words, a leading oncologist at a top medical center told my friend he would not survive the cancer ravaging his lymph system. The news wasn’t as surprising as the insensitive delivery: The doctor smiled nervously, slapped my friend on the back, shook our hands and swept out of the room. Months later, weakened by drugs, chemotherapy and radiation treatments, my friend died at the age of 42.

I learned then what many others already knew painfully well — that even the “experts” are uncomfortable discussing cancer. Most people know someone who has it, and statistics show that one out of three of us will get it. But cancer isn’t just a disease. In a society that worships autonomy and physical beauty, it represents our own fears of being invaded, of our bodies becoming less than whole.

Military metaphors describe treatment (think “magic bullet” or “killer T-cells”), and finding a cure for cancer has come to symbolize the ultimate accomplishment, one that Richard Nixon fantasized about when, as president, he declared a national war on cancer and poured billions into research. Now, two decades later, survival rates for most cancers remain unchanged. Maybe that’s why cancer is a taboo subject — as if to mention it will speed its inevitable visitation on us.

We introduce you to Keith Block, M.D., a practitioner who has dedicated his career to allaying fears about cancer in a most unusual way. He offers patients the most-effective, least-toxic treatments available (a vegetarian diet is his “magic bullet”). In our litigious “don’t touch” society, he holds hands and offers hugs, never retreating from the unsettling reality his patients face. But most important, he never gives up on anyone. A well-known cancer center recently spent thousands of dollars on an ad campaign claiming its doctors “put people first.” Block doesn’t need a campaign; his actions speak volumes.

Last winter, I had the privilege of spending several days with him behind the scenes at the Block Medical Center in Evanston, Ill. Knowing that many patients come to Block after their own oncologists give up hope, the thought of asking very ill people probing questions made me nervous. But patients willingly shared their experiences, reassured by Block’s unwavering investment in their health and well-being. I never saw him leave someone upset or needing to ask more questions. He wants to know what they’re eating, how they’re feeling, who is offering them emotional support and what is stressing them. I watched him work through breakfast and lunch while my own stomach grumbled in protest. I saw him try to control his rage when a gravely ill Medicaid patient was denied surgery. “They just gave up on him,” he said, dialing the first of many calls that would eventually deliver that patient to an operating room.

I left knowing that if anyone I love ever has cancer again, Block will be my first call. Then, as now, there will likely be a long waiting list to see him. Although there are many caring oncologists, I hope that those who blindly dispense conventional treatment and see their patients as body parts, not people, are willing to learn something from Block. Everyone who has ever lived with cancer deserves that much. •

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