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ask more questions about the patient's desire to have more children and provide them with fertility preservation options prior to treatment. This should be just as important as asking a patient about their allergies or medical history. You could be changing their lives.



My 18 Little Miracles

Rijon Charne

On May 9, 2016, I took my last law school final exam. After three grueling years of law school, there were no words to describe how excited I was to graduate and could not wait to celebrate that weekend. However, I had been feeling sick for two weeks and was severely fatigued, but I thought it was the usual exam stress. Just to be safe, I made an appointment with my doctor to ensure I would be well for my law school graduation on May 14, 2016.

What I expected to be a regular doctor's appointment turned out to be a life changing event. I explained my symptoms to my doctor and she performed a physical examination. She noticed an unusual lump above my left clavicle. She appeared concerned and made an immediate appointment with an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) specialist for the following morning. I arrived at the ENT expecting him to tell me my doctor had overreacted and the lump was nothing to be worried about. Rather, my ENT felt the lump and told me he needed to do an immediate biopsy. I asked him what the urgency was and he said it could be lymphoma. I sat there dumbstruck, trying to process this information. However, I decided I did not want to receive my medical results before my law school graduation because nothing would spoil the weekend I had been looking forward to for three years—not even cancer.

On Saturday, May 14, 2016, I graduated from law school. It was a weekend I will never forget. I was

having a joint graduation party with my boyfriend, whom I met in law school, and to my surprise my uncle flew in from South Africa and my best friend flew in from New York. So I decided to keep my doctor's appointment confidential.

The Monday following my graduation, May 16, 2016, I received the worst graduation gift imaginable. At 10:00am, my doctor called to tell me, "You have Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the lymph nodes." I remember hearing the diagnosis, dropping to the floor, and crying uncontrollably. I remember thinking, "There must be a mistake. This diagnosis cannot be right. I just graduated from law school and I am 27 years old. How could I have cancer?" But there was no mistake.

A week later, I arrived at one of the best cancer hospitals in the world located in Houston, Texas. My oncologist explained I had Stage 2A Hodgkin's lymphoma. This meant the cancer had spread from my neck to my chest, and had created a 10cm tumor in my chest. He told me the survival rate was 95%. Even with those statistics, my first thought was "Am I going to die?" Everything after that seemed inconsequential. To treat Hodgkin's, I would receive 8 rounds of ABVD chemotherapy followed by 16 radiation treatments. He told me this treatment would induce hair loss, nausea, and fatigue, but he never mentioned infertility. Fortunately, I knew that chemotherapy could affect fertility and when I asked what the statistics were regarding infertility, he told me there was a 20–30% chance of becoming infertile.

I always took for granted that someday I would have my own children, but after I was diagnosed with cancer, I learned not to take anything for granted. When I asked my oncologist if I should freeze my eggs as a precautionary measure, he told me he did not feel it was necessary because the risk of infertility was not high. To me however, freezing my eggs was necessary because even the slightest chance of being unable to have my own children devastated me. He referred me to a reproductive endocrinologist but told me that I needed to start chemotherapy as soon as possible because Hodgkin's lymphoma is a relatively aggressive cancer. If I decided to freeze my eggs, I had one month to do so.

When I met with my reproductive endocrinologist, Dr. Terri Woodard. I was taken aback by her compassion towards my parents and myself. Her understanding of my infertility fears and her expertise regarding the urgency of freezing my eggs was remarkable. I was distraught and caught completely off guard to learn that the entire fertility procedure could cost \$10,000–\$20,000 for the required medication, retrieval and freezing of my eggs. My insurance company refused to cover any of these costs because it did not consider the potential of infertility a medical necessity as I was not infertile yet. I had thousands of dollars of law school loans and shortly, I would endure tremendous unforeseen medical expenses, so I did not know where I would find the money to cover the fertility procedure.

When I expressed my financial concerns to Dr. Woodard, she informed me of LIVESTRONG Fertility. This program, sponsored by LIVESTRONG, provides individuals with free medication and contracts with reproductive endocrinologists nationally to provide lower cost egg retrieval and egg freezing for patients who meet certain criteria. I contacted LIVESTRONG, filled out the required paper work, and received the incredible news that I had qualified for the LIVESTRONG Fertility program. Unfortunately, even though they provided the majority of the medication needed for my fertility regiment, one medication was not covered, and this medication cost \$7000. I found another fertility program through Walgreens, called the Heartbeat Program, which covered this medication. I could not believe I had found two programs to cover all of my medication costs.

I arrived at Dr. Woodard's office with a suitcase full of medicine and my heart beating a thousand miles an hour. During my first consultation, she explained the entire process could take anywhere from 9–13 days. I would also have to inject myself with two different medications every night, and I would need blood tests and ultrasounds every other day to make sure I did not hyperstimulate. I am petrified of needles, so imagine my distress when the nurse informed me I had to inject myself in front of her, so she could confirm I was doing it correctly. I looked at her with horror as she handed

me the thick needle, but I knew she meant business and there was no way I could back out now. I sat down, took a deep breath, grabbed my stomach, counted to three and stabbed the needle into my stomach. Believe it or not, it barely hurt and I was so proud of myself. Every night at 8:00 PM for two weeks, I sat down at my "drug table," mixed together the different medications, squeezed my stomach, counted to three, and injected myself. By the end, I was an expert with injections and needles no longer made me flinch.

A few side effects included irritability because of all the hormones, abdominal discomfort, and bloating due to the stimulation of the ovaries to ensure the production of mature eggs. Nevertheless, these side effects didn't bother me, because the process of watching my ovaries and follicles mature was the most incredible experience I have ever witnessed. With every ultrasound during my 12 day procedure, I joyfully watched my follicles grow from tiny 7mm black dots to large 20mm circles, knowing that each of these follicles carried a possible egg. I waited with anticipation to receive the daily email informing me of how many follicles were developing and how big they were growing.

Finally, on the 11th day of the procedure, I was told my follicles were large enough for retrieval. I delightedly gave myself the final injection, which released the eggs from the follicles, allowing the eggs to be retrieved thirty–six hours later. The time had finally arrived for my retrieval. The hospital room had an unusual setup. I was on a hospital bed and next to me was a separate room with a sliding window, where a technician would immediately receive the retrieved eggs from my doctor and would analyze their viability. The next day I received the incredible news that eighteen of my eggs had been collected and frozen. These are my eighteen little miracles.

I was incredibly fortunate to have an oncologist who introduced me to a phenomenal reproductive endocrinologist who understood the significance and urgency of freezing my eggs. However, after speaking with many cancer patients, I have found this experience to be quite unique. Many young cancer patients have not been told about the option

of fertility preservation, and if they are, their oncologists do not inform them of the amazing programs designed specifically to cover the costs of fertility procedures for cancer patients. Cancer patients face a huge financial burden, and when they believe there are no financial options to assist with fertility procedures, the option of fertility preservation becomes an untouchable dream. When my insurance company told me the procedure was not covered because it was not considered a medical necessity, I was furious, because to me as well as many other cancer patients, infertility is a medical necessity.

When I was first diagnosed and heard that my fertility could be affected, the option to freeze my eggs was the silver lining amongst the storm. I was so inspired by this unexpected fertility journey that I decided to pursue reproductive law as a career. Additionally, one of my goals is to work with national organizations, like AAARTA and LIVESTRONG Fertility, to educate oncologists on the remarkable fertility programs offered specifically to assist people diagnosed with cancer. In addition, I will work with like-minded individuals to fight insurance companies on changing their policies to cover the costs of fertility treatments. The option of fertility preservation is a gift and it is unjust for some people to be offered the incredible opportunity of fertility treatments, while others are not. I know it will take time to implement these changes but to provide cancer patients with an alternative option to infertility is something worth fighting for.

Cancer Isn't Fair

Tarah D. Warren

Cancer is Unfair

Cancer most definitely isn't fair, and those who have been through it understand asking "why?" is a slippery slope into a mire of self-pity. I have fallen down the slope a time or two and sometimes

it stems from a choice taken from me. A choice, which slipped away when I was just twenty-nine years of age. It is a milestone in life, an innate gift many take for granted, and something we grow up expecting to have. What is the choice you ask? The ability to start a family, and capability of God's greatest miracle, life.

Even though it is best not to ask "why" there are still times I think to myself why me? Most often those moments happen at random social media posts, or when I'm caught in a conversation where everyone around is talking about their kids, and for a few don't know how to discuss anything otherwise. Or when you visit your best friends and both are pregnant at the same time. Or when your sister just mentions, "I would have loved to meet your children", and you unexpectedly lose it, and the sting of hearing, "Having kids is the best". I don't have children, which is an uncomfortable realization for more than just my husband and I. However, the hardest part is it should have been a choice, which is the part that feels unfair.

Cancer unfairly took the choice away from me after I was diagnosed with Stage IV Ovarian Cancer in December of 2012. Many of you know that stage IV is on the dire side of the cancer staging scale. It means there is little hope, but most importantly, it means that cancer cells have traveled outside of the original site and embedded themselves in other parts of the body, and boy did they! Likely the most unfair part of my story is not that cancer led to infertility, but that my cancer diagnosis should've been caught much sooner when it was in an earlier stage.

A Journey to Stage IV Ovarian Cancer

After I married my husband, Benjamin, in October of 2008, I went back to my family doctor, and reiterated concerns about pain I had experienced since I was a teenager. My doctor made a referral for me to see a very reputable OBGYN, Dr. D, and I was pleasantly surprised to hear it was the same doctor who delivered his children (in my head believing he was good enough to be a doctor's doctor).

I appreciated the referral and felt hopeful that we could find some answers to relieve