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Hodgkin's lymphoma survivor: How my cancer journey led to a career in reproductive law

BY RIJON CHARNE

I always took for granted that I'd have children someday. So when I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma in May 2016 at age 27, I was devastated. Hodgkin's lymphoma is a relatively aggressive cancer, so I knew I needed to start chemotherapy right away. However, I also knew that chemo can cause infertility.

My oncologist at MD Anderson, Dr. Luis Fayad, said there was only a 20-30% chance of me becoming infertile due to chemotherapy, but I wasn't comfortable with those odds. He understood my concerns and referred me to Dr. Terri Woodard, a reproductive endocrinologist at MD Anderson.

Preserving my fertility after a Hodgkin's lymphoma diagnosis

Dr. Woodard's expertise in preserving fertility among cancer patients was evident the very first time we spoke. She was incredibly compassionate and she understood the urgency I felt about freezing my eggs, and carefully explained my options.

I was shocked to learn that the egg-retrieval and freezing process could cost anywhere between \$10,000 and \$20,000. I was even more shocked to learn that my insurance wouldn't cover it — because technically, I wasn't infertile yet. I'd already incurred significant financial obligations by graduating from law school, so I had no idea how I was going to pay for this procedure.

Fortunately, Dr. Woodard is also very resourceful. She told me about two different financial assistance programs that could help with the costs of freezing my eggs: one provides free medication and free or low-cost egg retrieval and freezing for patients who meet certain criteria. The other paid for the \$7,000 medication that wasn't covered by the first program. I am so grateful for these programs, because if it wasn't for the financial assistance, I would never have been able to show up to my first appointment with a suitcase full of medicine ready to grow my eggs.

'18 little miracles' worth every side effect

For me, the fertility drugs' worst side effects were irritability, abdominal discomfort and bloating. However, those issues didn't faze me, because watching my follicles mature during every ultrasound was one of the most incredible things I've ever witnessed. I saw them grow from tiny black dots into larger circles, each potentially containing an egg.

The process of retrieving my eggs took about 14 days. The first 11 nights, I had to inject myself with two different medications to force my follicles to mature. I had blood tests and ultrasounds every other day to make sure my ovaries weren't overstimulated. Once my follicles were mature enough, I gave myself the final injection to release the eggs. I went to the hospital three days later so my eggs could finally be retrieved.

After the procedure, I got the incredible news: 18 of my eggs had been collected and frozen. I consider them my 18 little miracles.

Paying it forward: focusing my legal practice on reproductive law

I was incredibly fortunate to have an oncologist who understood how important my fertility was to me — and who introduced me to a phenomenal reproductive endocrinologist who helped preserve mine.

Not everyone is so lucky. Many young cancer patients don't even know these fertility preserving options exist, much less that there are amazing programs out there designed specifically to assist with the costs. Cancer patients are already facing huge financial burdens, so trying to find the money to pay for both treatment and fertility procedures may seem like an impossible dream.

Because of my incredible fertility journey, I decided to focus my legal practice on reproductive law. I want to persuade insurance companies to change their policies regarding fertility preservation procedures for cancer patients. Mine was not covered because it wasn't considered a medical necessity, and I was furious.



Rijon Charne



To me, the prospect of infertility is a medical emergency.

Rijon Charne
Survivor

To me — and to many other cancer patients — the prospect of infertility *is* a medical emergency. So I want to do everything I can to ensure other cancer patients know their options.

Request an appointment at MD Anderson online or by calling 1-866-345-2324.

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