

My Surgery Gone Wrong

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When I was twenty-six years old, I was told to go to the doctor's for a checkup after applying for a job. For as far back as I could remember, I was never a sick person and had not seen a doctor in many years. So I picked a family physician named Doctor Robert Gnade out of the phonebook. I went to this checkup thinking to myself how young I was. Also, I was in the best shape of my life; I worked out faithfully and watched what I ate and drank. The only unhealthy thing I did was smoke a pack of cigarettes a day. So I was thinking the appointment would go by fairly quickly, and he would give me a clean bill of health. The appointment seemed to be going fine until the doctor checked what would soon change my life forever: my neck.

When people get sick, they do not think of the neck area: the throat, yes, but not the neck. I am in his office, and the doctor asks me in a very serious tone if I have ever been told that I had lumps in my neck. Naturally I had not been told this before, since I had not seen a doctor in years. After a few minutes he begins to tell me he thinks it is important for me to have a second opinion. And with all that information to sit and swallow, he wanted me to go see a throat specialist named Dr. William Shermer. This would be the man whose decisions would affect my life forever.

I met with Dr. Shermer in late 2001, a few weeks after I was initially told about the lumps. He confirmed what Dr. Gnade had already told me, that the lumps really did exist and that they were my thyroids. He told me the next step would be to have a biopsy done, and he wanted me to have it done rather quickly. Within a week, he had me in for *one* of the most painful procedures I would ever experience. Never once did I ever dream I would have this same procedure done not once, but three times. The surgeon informed me that a numbing medicine is not administered during this procedure. So after being told that, he had me lie down and then began by putting a rather long needle into my neck where they felt the lumps in my thyroid. In that needle, there was a tiny scrub brush, like the ones you would clean a baby bottle with. He proceeded to use this tiny scrub brush to collect cell samples inside of the area he wanted tested. He then pulled the brush back into the needle and pulled the needle out of my neck. I felt like I had just given someone permission to torture me.

I was told to go home, and that I would have to wait a week or two to get the results back from the lab to confirm whether or not it was cancer or noncancerous. Since that day, the nerve-racking process of waiting for results would become a natural thing for me.

I was so scared, a week and a half later when I received the call about the results. The phone had caller ID, so I knew it was the doctors' office phoning me to give me the news. My mind immediately began racing. Was the doctor going to tell me I was going to be fine? Was I still the twenty-six year old I thought I was, healthy and in the best shape of my life? Or was he going to confirm I had cancer and that my two small children would have to grow up someday without a mother? I waited for the answers to my questions that I had been thinking every second of everyday for a week and a half; I heard the doctor say that the results were inconclusive and that I would have to repeat the biopsy *again*.

When the results of the second biopsy also came back as inconclusive, the doctor decided the third biopsy would be done with an ultra sound. By this time, I was asking myself why they had not used it the first two times. They could have avoided all the unnecessary pain they were putting my through. After the torture ended, the doctor sent me home again to begin the waiting game. By this time I began distancing myself from my family and friends. The only phone call I wanted to take was from the doctor. I drove myself crazy waiting for my fortune to be told.

As the weeks went by, I was such a wreck that I had to go back to see doctor Gnade for depression. I started to feel that death was not such a bad option. I would sit in my room for days and not speak to my husband or my children. Doctor Gnade decided to put me on and antidepressant pills called Prozac to try and cope with the days ahead of me. After having this procedure done and having heard the results for the third time come back inconclusive, I went numb instantly. I began to think I was having a nervous breakdown.

My head was racing and my heart was thumping. I wanted to jump through the phone and slap the recorder so I could make it stop repeating itself. Then I heard the words I was not even prepared to hear. There would be no more biopsies; instead, I would be going into the hospital in two days for an emergency surgery. The inconclusive results had left the doctor with no other choice but to take out my thyroids in case they were cancerous. The next two days were the worst days of my life. I spent every second of the forty-eight hours thinking of how I would feel when or if they told me I had cancer.

My surgery was scheduled for nine o'clock a.m. on Friday, February 20th, 2002. At the doctor's request, I arrived at the hospital at seven a.m. to do paperwork and to be prepped before surgery. The first half of the first hour was spent filling out paperwork that asked me every question imaginable about myself, except what color of underwear I was wearing. The second half of the hour was spent waiting-- waiting for something or someone. Finally, they came in and took me to be prepped for the surgery. They took all my vitals and started to administer the IV. Then again I did what I had learned I had to do: Wait.

Finally the doctor came in and explained what he would be doing after I was put to sleep. He let me know that both thyroids would be looked at, and if he thought either one looked cancerous, he would have to remove both of them. But if they did not look cancerous, he would only take one out. His reason behind this was because I was so young. The doctor said he did not want me to have to take medicine for the rest of my life. Without fully understanding the consequences of that statement and information, I went to sleep.

When I started to wake up, I could not remember where I was. Everything felt like a dream. That is when the angel in white came in and said to me, "Good news. To the naked eye, the thyroids did not look cancerous, so we only took out the left one and left the right one in." The doctor would be sending the removed thyroid to a pathologist to have it tested. This man in white was telling me everything I had so longed to hear. Finally I had gotten good news, or so I thought.

I spent one night in the hospital and was released the next afternoon. I was given instructions on how to treat my wounds and was told I would need to see someone in ten days to look at the incisions and that someone would call me when the lab results came back on the thyroid they had removed. So I had to wait for two more long weeks for someone to call me and tell me . . . what? What would they tell me?

I cried upon seeing my incision for the first time after the surgery. I cried because I was angry, because I was sad, and because I was confused. I could not understand why this was happening to me, and I developed a "poor pity me" attitude that stayed with me for years.

The surgery was over and now I was back to the good old waiting game. When I went back for the ten day checkup, the doctor informed me that I was healing nicely, and he assured me that his office would call me when the results came in.

Within the next two days, I received a call from Dr. Shermer. When the phone rang, I had told myself that, no matter what he told me, I was going to be okay. If it was cancer, the thyroid could be treated, and if it was not cancer, then I was good. But nothing prepared me for the life-changing information he was about to tell me. First he explained to me who he was and why he was calling (as if, for some reason in the last two weeks, I would have forgotten who he was and what he did).

"Evva," he said, "I have some good and bad news for you. Good news is that it is not cancer. Bad news is it has precancerous cells, and you will have to be monitored every ninety days for the rest of your life or until your remaining thyroid stops functioning or becomes cancerous."

Wait. What did he just say? This is all I could think of the whole time he is speaking. I have to be tested every three months for the rest of my life? Then he proceeded to tell me the other good news: thyroid cancer is the fastest cured cancer if it is caught and treated in the first stages. The other bad news was that when the test comes back that my thyroid was not working properly, they would have to perform the surgery again to remove the second thyroid before proceeding with cancer treatments. This is the reason behind why I would have to be tested every ninety days. I was devastated; it felt like someone had just cut my throat (literally!) and was telling me they would do it again in the future. I felt the decision Dr. Shermer made to leave in the thyroid to keep me from taking medicine because I was so young had now taken away any traces of me having a normal life again. Soon after this phone call my mental health started to fall apart.

People do not normally know they are going crazy, but I knew. I could feel it. For months, I spent my days in bed after the doctor told me the results. I refused to answer the phone for fear of having to talk about what was happening to me. I stopped being able to go places in public because I would freak out and could not breathe. I called my doctor and made an appointment. He told me that I showed signs of panic attacks and wanted me to continue taking the Prozac, but he also wanted me to start taking Xanax to help control the panic attacks. I was advised not to exceed four pills in a day and was sent on my way. I started at first taking one pill a day everyday to keep me from having a panic attacks. Then by the time my appointment came for my first blood work to check my thyroid, I was eating four of them a day, everyday.

After having my blood drawn, I went through my normal waiting period of two weeks to see whether my thyroid was still working properly. I spent those first two weeks in pure hell. My mind was playing tricks on me. I had convinced myself that I was going to die and that I needed to prepare my children and my husband. I had stayed in my room for so long that they would have to come in to talk to me. I began yelling at them every time they came into my room. It was my way of hoping they would not want to be around me anymore. That way, if I died, it would not hurt them as much. I began picking fights with my husband all the time just to make it easier for him. My mind said that if they all hated me, then they would not be hurt if I was gone. I received the phone call two weeks to the day I had my blood work done. The results were finally what I been waiting to hear. Well, at least the first part of the results was what I wanted to hear. The lady on the phone said my thyroid was still working properly and to come back in three months to do it again.

By this time I was feeling completely crazy; I was picking fights with my family, I was locking myself in my room, and I began avoiding everyone except doctors. My doctor had become the only person who was going to save me, so I became totally, 100 percent dependent on him. When my prescriptions ran out, I would call him, and he would give me more without really asking me any questions. So when I went back for the third Xanax prescription in a two month period, he told me I had to come see him because he could not just give me another prescription for Xanax. When I went into his office, he began asking me how often I was having panic attacks and how often I was taking the medicine he had prescribed to me. I told him I was taking four Xanax every day and that I was not having any panic attacks. I could tell he immediately became irritated with my response. He then declared I was abusing the medicine and that I was going to have to be slowly taken back off of them.

I was so confused. These little pills made me feel so much better. Really what they did was prevent me from feeling anything, which to me was better than dealing with the emotional pain of it all. So now he was going to take away the one thing that kept me going. He began to slowly lower my intake until I was completely off the medicine. He kept me on the Prozac for three years treating my depression, and then one day I woke up and decided I did not want to take the pills anymore and that I wanted to live a normal life without doctors.

By now I could not remember what a normal life was. I just knew I was tired of doctors, pills and tests. So I made up my mind that I was done and I would no longer take any medications. Even though I knew I was supposed to be weaned off them slowly, just like the Xanax, I decided to throw them all away instead. Next, I was finished with getting my blood work done and the waiting that came along with it, so I stopped going to the doctors. Although I felt a sense of relief over the last three years of not having to wait anymore for the dreadful results of yes or no, I feared that my decision to stop going would increase my odds of dying.

So in April of 2008, I finally went back to the doctors for testing. I reminded myself that the results would come in, and whatever the results were, I would deal with them then, not before. I needed to be able to wait two weeks for the results with no medication. The results came back that my thyroid is still working.

I was scheduled to go back in July of 2008 for another round of tests, but I chose to skip it. I figure that, for now, I will go back twice a year instead of the recommended four times. It's better than not going back at all, which is how I used to feel. I still think about all the things I have gone through in the past six years and start to go back to my pity me syndrome, but then my husband reminds me about what it is that we are doing. We are living!

I still try working out every day, eat and drink smart and have even managed to quit smoking as of September 25, 2008. I decided I have to live my life and enjoy it for every second that I am here. I cannot spend my time worrying about dying because then I will never really be living.

If I could change anything about my situation, first I would have insisted that if the doctor took one thyroid, he had to take both. I could live with being on medicine for the rest of my life much more easily then spending my life waiting for the bad news that I have cancer. Second, I would have not let the experience get me down; I would have dealt with it one day at a time. I spent so much time worried about dying that I robbed myself and my family of living. My husband is the strong, silent type who let me rant and rave at him. He never let me push him away, even though I tried many times. He held strong for me and our children. I do not think my children thought much about the surgery at that time, other than the fact that mom had a wound with a bandage covering her neck, and after that, she became very grumpy. They were very young, and to this day do not seem to remember much about that time period.

I will eventually go back to four times a year being tested until I have the second surgery. For now, I will take it one day at a time so I can think about my husband, my children, living, and nothing else.