Progress Is Real

July 10, 2017 By Larry Watson

If you remember, last time I shared with you about my visit to the hospital. In this installment, I returned to Temple University Medical Center only to be told the dreaded news no 50-plus man wants to hear: “You need to schedule a colonoscopy,” said my gastroenterologist. I took a deep breath and said nothing. (I couldn’t speak because the saliva had dried in my mouth.)

Anyway, the reason I went back to the hospital is because of chronic headaches that led me to seek the services of a neurologist. (Believe me when I say that these headaches are crazy. The pain can be so severe that I feel like I’m being punished for any wicked thought or thing I’ve ever done!)

After the specialist took my history and examined me, she prescribed Elavil for my headache and as a way to help me get some much needed sleep.

After a day or two passed, I went to my local Walgreens to pick up the meds prescribed by the doctor. I knew these drugs were in pill form and the tablets would fit in one small bottle. The clerk behind the pharmacy counter who filled my prescription told me the wait would be five minutes, so I turned around and picked up a magazine to read. After a few moments, I heard, “Sir your prescription is ready.”

Lo and behold, when I turned around, I spotted a huge Walgreens shopping bag on the counter. Since I was the only person in the pharmacy waiting area, I knew the bag had to be for me. But why was the bag so big? I felt there must be some mistake. After all, I was there for just one medication. Immediately, I turned defensive.

“Whose bag is that?” I asked the clerk. “I know that ain’t for me because I only came in here for one prescription. I’m just on two pills that I take once each day!”

Then I realized what was happening. I was having a flashback remembering the huge bag of pills that long-term survivors like me used to tote out the pharmacy. The clerk told me to calm down. I was overreacting, he said.

Indeed, when I looked inside the bag there was a gallon bottle with the liquid solution I had to drink to prep for my upcoming colonoscopy. I returned to the present and looked at the clerk. He couldn’t have been older than 25 years old, much too young to know about those early treatment regimens that entailed popping pills by the fistful. Those were the days other people like me with HIV lived through, dreading having to force those meds down two or three times every day.

When I left the pharmacy, I laughed out loud. At home, I told my wife what happened. She laughed too. That night, I thought about how far we've come with HIV treatment. Currently, instead of having to swallow dozens of pills, antiretroviral treatment, a.k.a. ART, many people just need one pill, once daily, that can be taken with or without food.

Since I came late to the p-ART-y years ago, to keep the virus at bay, I used to swallow 13 pills each and every day until nearly one year ago. Today, I can say—with a huge smile and a heartfelt sigh of relief—that I'm truly grateful research and progress in science and medicine have left those days far behind us.

Now, can someone please find a less intrusive, more convenient way to screen for colon cancer?

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