

Physician and Patient

When family physician Thomas Bellavia, M.D. was told he had elevated levels of prostate specific antigens, the doctors who performed a biopsy to examine the affected area said the results were negative for prostate cancer and suggested that he return in a year. Trusting his own instincts as a patient and physician, Dr. Bellavia insisted that a year was too long, and he'd rather come back in three months – which he did. This time, Dr. Bellavia urged his doctor to perform tests and biopsies again, and ultimately he was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Today, Dr. Bellavia is celebrating 20 years cancer free.

As a patient, Dr. Bellavia's experience reminded him to be an advocate for himself. As a physician, it reminded him of an even more important lesson – listen to patients. In the short time following his brush with cancer, Dr. Bellavia experienced two other life-changing medical situations reminding him of the enormity of this lesson.

In one instance, it was shortly after experiencing chest pain and asking his cardiologist for further testing - only to be denied – that Dr. Bellavia required emergency quintuple bypass surgery. As he was being wheeled into the operating room, the cardiologist admitted he should have listened to Dr. Bellavia's concerns.

After the surgery, while still in the hospital, Dr. Bellavia's health took another turn as he coded and went into shock. Once he was awake and alert, the nephrologist came to check on Dr. Bellavia and let him know that he had kidney failure. But much to Dr. Bellavia's dismay, the nephrologist was abrupt with

little time for niceties.

"The doctor said, 'Hey Tom, you have kidney failure,'" said Dr. Bellavia. "I said 'Hi, how about you come into the room and ask me how I am doing first?'"

However, the nephrologist took special interest in Dr. Bellavia's needs, suggested a transplant and got him on the transplant list as early as possible to find a positive match. Now, almost six years later, Dr. Bellavia had a successful kidney transplant.

After reflecting on his own experience with physicians, Dr. Bellavia hoped he was listening to what patients were telling him.

"I remind residents and other physicians all the time – you really have to listen to your patients," says Dr. Bellavia. "They'll tell you everything you need to know, as long as you let them speak. In medicine, before we had all these tests to help with diagnosis, we relied on what the patient said. Even though the diagnostics are helpful, you've really got to take the time to listen to patients. Compassion and a good solid rapport with patients goes miles in treating patients – people trust friends and those they have a good relationship with. When you have a good relationship, you can really help people get better."

In addition to reminding physicians of the importance of a trusting relationship



Thomas Bellavia, M.D.

with patients, Dr. Bellavia uses his personal stories to relay to patients the importance of being advocates in their health care.

"If I didn't take a special interest in my own care, I wouldn't be here now," he says. "Patients should always ask their physician all of the questions they may have. Most importantly, physicians need to make sure they are providing a comfortable environment for patients to ask those questions – we're treating the patients, not just the disease or injury."

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