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Finding right doctor helped save woman's life

When Debbie Koutsodontis arrived at the hospital, doctors confirmed her fear: It was a heart attack that gripped her as she stood over a shopping cart at the Target store.

But in today's age of modern medicine, that's fixable, right?

Well, not when doctors had already done battle with lung cancer using several doses of radiation. It knocked out the cancer, but in the process melted her insides so organs were damaged and cemented together.

"They told me I had less than a year. Be with your family and make every moment count," Koutsodontis, a 57-year-old mother of four, grandmother of five from suburban Lake Worth, recalled.

But first they shipped her from the hospital in Boca Raton to Delray Medical Center to see what doctors there might be able to do.

"It's not unreasonable to turn that patient down," agrees surgeon Dr. Richard Cartledge who met Koutsodontis at Delray Medical.

Cartledge trained at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center where heart surgery patients are sent after radiation injury. He gave Koutsodontis an alternative to slow death: a high-risk operation that could return her life to normal if it didn't kill her right there on the table.

"I told her it was extremely high-risk, but I told her it's really her only option," Cartledge said.

Radiation downside

Fortunately, quandaries like the one Koutsodontis found herself in are increasingly less common as radiation techniques have improved markedly even in the seven-year span since she was treated.

"We are much better able to spare the critical organs," said radiation oncologist Dr. David Herold, medical director at Jupiter Medical Center.

This should not be a cautionary tale that scares people from radiation, Herold said. Radiation has been proven time and again to extend lives of cancer patients.

Without radiation, it's unlikely Koutsodontis would've lived long enough to have that heart attack, Herold said.

But it is a reminder that all procedures have their downsides. And while some tumors can be excised with a virtual knife that largely spares neighboring tissue, sometimes it's a matter of luck.

Koutsodontis, a 33-year smoker, had developed a 4-centimeter nodule of cancer in her left lung. (The smoking also put her at higher risk for heart problems, which run in Koutsodontis' family.)

And at the time, her oncologist had nowhere to aim but near her heart to get to the lungs.

"Get rid of the cancer, that was my main focus," Koutsodontis said. But she's a nurse and she says she knew in the back of her mind how radiation worked.

"It was killing the cancer. It was also damaging normal cells. And the coronary arteries are very sensitive to the radiation," Cartledge said. "Her arteries were shriveled up. They were nearly destroyed by the radiation."

Surgeon choice critical

Where doctors often can resolve coronary heart disease with a catheter that opens the blood vessels from the insides, the damage to Koutsodontis' vessels wasn't confined to one spot. The damage was so diffuse, the vessels had to be bypassed with new ones, Cartledge said.

The first place surgeons usually turn for replacement vessels is in the chest cavity, but those were in no better shape than the ones at Koutsodontis' heart. So the surgeon had to go to her legs for those vessels.

But the biggest challenge for Cartledge was getting through scar tissue and to the heart.

And this is where it was important that Koutsodontis found a surgeon experienced in dealing with radiation injury, Herold said.

"It's not very common. This is a rare effect," Herold said. But patients should not give up when one surgeon declines. "You need a specialist."

The radiation had created massive scar tissue around her heart, hiding the damaged vessels beneath a sort of "rind," Cartledge said.

Cartledge had to peel back that rind to work, but do it gently. A tear to the aorta or the heart itself would prove fatal. Where normally Cartledge could get to those vessels in 10 or 15 minutes, it took hours to navigate through the scar tissue.

In the process, Cartledge also separated the lung where it had fused to the heart.

Koutsodontis recalls him calling the scene inside her chest akin to Styrofoam in a microwave.

"It's like someone poured glue into your chest," Cartledge said. "There's scar tissue sticking your lungs to all the other organs."

Koutsodontis survived surgery and seven weeks later returned to work at a local detox facility.

While oncologists and doctors point to the medical literature to reiterate the value of radiation, Koutsodontis isn't so sanguine. She's not so sure she'd choose radiation again, though today's technology might have presented her with less caustic options.

Said Koutsodontis: "It was traumatizing, but I'm a fighter."

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