

CHOOSING: MY JOURNEY, MY CHOICES

Randy Dietrich

The key to your universe is that you can choose.
~ Carl Frederick

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My sister and I have come to the medical library at the Cleveland Clinic—partly to seek information, but mostly to fill time as our mother recovers from heart surgery. We launch an Internet search for *hepatitis C*. That’s the term my doctor used when ordering additional tests after routine blood work indicated elevated *liver enzymes*. Except for suggesting that I avoid *alcohol* while waiting for the test results—a recommendation I took only half to heart—he had not indicated the problem was serious.

I’m 42. Energetic. About to be named president of my company.

And I am totally unprepared for what I see on the computer screen.

Article after article paints a grim picture. Studies project more people will die of hepatitis C than from AIDS. There are treatments, but the side effects are serious. “Cure” isn’t a word I can find anywhere.

Later, I will realize that I have just taken the first steps on an amazing physical, emotional, and spiritual journey. One that, for me, would be a journey of health. But for now, all I know is that my life is about to change radically.

And I am frightened.

That was more than nine years ago.

The fact you’re reading this chapter of *Hepatitis C Choices* tells me you, or someone you love, has been diagnosed with the virus. While my experience navigating hepatitis C certainly hasn’t made me an expert on the subject, I think my story may prove helpful as you move forward on your own journey. It details the health decisions one man has made and where they’ve led. And it reinforces what may be the most important lesson I’ve learned along the way — that the very act of choosing can bring us to a place of greater wellness.

Each of us facing hepatitis C does so with a unique set of health factors, genetics, support, and financial resources. Yours will play a role in setting your course just as mine did. But regardless of your circumstances, I sincerely hope you’ll remember one thing: **This is your journey. These are your choices.**

Beginning

To choose is also to begin.
~ Starhawk

Countless questions

Needless to say, the night after my medical library introduction to hepatitis C was a long one. I read. I cried. I wondered how I might have contracted the virus, as I’d had no blood transfusions and had never used drugs intravenously. I worried that I might have infected my wife or children. And I kept thinking there had been some mistake. After all, I’d had a physical

shortly before and it had shown nothing like this.

The next morning, I called my doctor’s office for my test results. Not only was I positive for the virus, I had a viral load of 799,000. For about 20 minutes, the tears came again, accompanied by a flood of concerns. What should I do? How much time did I have? What were my odds of beating it?

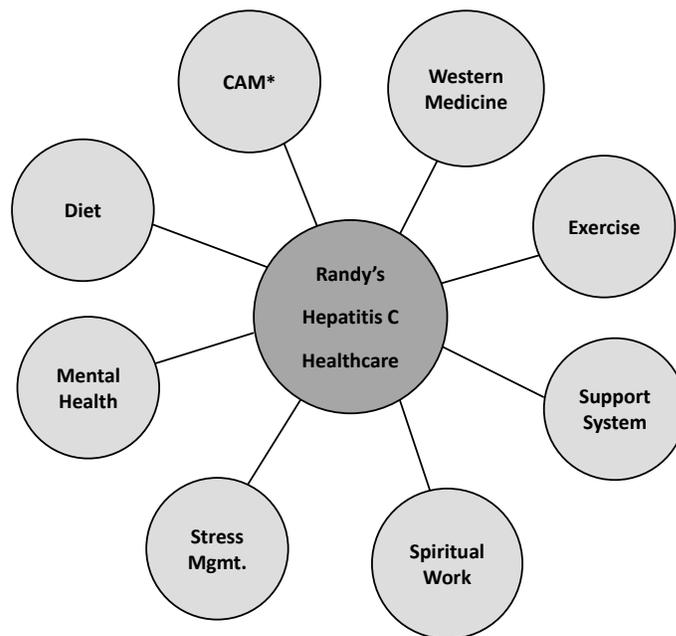
Then the thought hit me: *Did you really think you would escape having to deal with any major problems?* I had always encouraged others with serious health challenges to become experts in their disease. I had given out copies of Dr. Bernie Siegel’s book *Love, Medicine and Miracles* to friends fighting cancer. I had “talked the talk.” Now I was going to have to “walk the walk.”

With my sister’s help, I searched the articles we’d printed for names of expert resources I might contact. My first call was to Hep C Connection, a national organization for people affected by hepatitis C. A very helpful gentleman there began answering my questions. I learned some basic facts, such as the meaning of the term *viral load*, and that my level was not high. My liver enzymes were clearly above normal, but not off the chart. Still, I wasn’t clear about what the disease might mean to me. What was my prognosis? How fast or slow would liver damage occur? Would I require a liver transplant?

The evening I returned home to Denver, I told my wife about my diagnosis. We vowed we would fight it together—even though we had no idea what that meant or where it would take us in the future. In the near term, however, we had a 12-day trip to Australia slated that same week. We went, accompanied by a small library of books and journals discussing hepatitis C and its treatment.

I read every one. And before long, a better picture of the disease emerged. For most people, hepatitis C is not a death sentence. The term “*chronic hepatitis C*” simply means the virus persists in the liver—not that I would develop all the symptoms, that my liver would become cirrhotic, or that I would need a liver transplant. I would, however, be wise to avoid substances that negatively affect the liver, starting with alcohol. Fried foods, coffee, red meat and many of my favorite foods would also need to go.

Flying home from Australia, I drew the diagram shown in Figure 1 and began playing a little game.



*Complementary and Alternative Medicine
Figure 1. Components of Health and Wellness

I would cover up each of the outer circles in succession, asking myself, “Can I ignore this aspect of my healthcare?” What I realized was that each category of care was important to maintaining my health. I would need to investigate all the various disciplines to figure out what I needed to do now and what to do next.

Taking a Team Approach

“When opportunity knocks on your door, it is not always a friendly or welcome sound. Sometimes the opportunity is hidden in the very concerning and frightening sound of a doctor telling you that you have a serious, perhaps even life-threatening illness. Often there can be a positive outcome, and there are ways to turn these words into a positive life experience.”

**~ Jim Possehl, Founder
Republic Financial Corporation**

There’s an old proverb that says, “If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans.” Hepatitis C definitely was not in my plans. I’m guessing it wasn’t in yours, either.

It’s like the barnacled sailor’s response in *Pirates of the Caribbean* when the heroine told him she didn’t believe in ghost stories: “Well, you better start believing, because you’re in one now.”

It took some time for the initial shock of my diagnosis to fade. But it did. At that point, I met with Jim Possehl, the founder and CEO of my company, Republic Financial Corporation.

I told him of my test results, the *liver biopsy*, and that my doctor recommended immediate *interferon-based therapy*. When Jim asked what course I would take, I replied that I had some research to do before making any decisions — *a lot of research*. We discussed hiring a medical professional to assist me in investigating options, or possibly even a physician, but decided any one person would be biased by his/her own training and experience. What was needed, we agreed, was a true team approach.

At our company, we make decisions by convening many different business disciplines in the same room—sales, legal, operations, financial, and management. Each discipline challenges the other. It’s a process we call *teamstorming*, and it’s proven quite effective in yielding more creative solutions that benefit all involved. What if we were to employ the teamstorming process in this arena? Could we break down some of the preconceptions and prejudices that keep various healing disciplines from respecting and integrating best practices and outcomes?

It was worth a try.

At the end of our discussion, Jim and I concurred that I would postpone becoming president of the company until I had a better feel for what having hepatitis C would mean. We also agreed that I would take a 3- to 5-month sabbatical to assemble a team of healthcare professionals to brainstorm possible common solutions for people affected by chronic hepatitis C.

The four-and-a-half months I took marked the beginning of the Caring Ambassadors Hepatitis C Program. With Republic Financial Corporation’s underwriting and understanding, I now had the opportunity to gather nearly a dozen medical experts and hear their theories on clearing the virus or living with it. What we learned through this process of communication and challenge could then help energize the current hepatitis C knowledge base.

For knowledge *is* power. And information *empowers*.

Securing Support

I noted earlier that each of us comes to this challenge with our own unique set of resources. One of my most powerful assets was and is my support system. From the beginning, it has been *great*.

- **My sister Lorren**, who had been with me in the medical library the day I first learned of the virus, agreed to work with me to establish the Caring Ambassadors Hepatitis C Program. She was instrumental in researching the virus and its treatment, separating truth from fiction, and assembling the brainstorming team. Personally, she wanted me to pursue interferon-based treatment at the start. But she supported my choices at every step.
- **Kim, my wife**, offered love and support without bounds. She became a wizard with the juicer and a gourmet where healthy foods are concerned. It's really not hard to eat well when someone else does all the work.
- **My kids** were amazing and their confidence strengthened my resolve. My then 12-year-old daughter wrote on the Caring Ambassadors Internet site, "My dad is very strong and when he gets better, it will be the happiest day of my life." She didn't say *if*. She said *when*.
- **My team** of healthcare providers gave me love and support along with their skill and knowledge. They were willing to engage in intellectual arguments, consider other input, and always keep my best interests at heart.
- **My company** gave me five months to start an organization focused on hepatitis C. My colleagues offered encouragement and understanding. Together, they made it possible for me to take the time necessary to maintain and improve my health.
- **My friends, neighbors, and parents of the kids I coach**. Having hepatitis C was never a secret. Why be ashamed? The result was a lot of people telling me I inspired them — which inspired *me*. Our openness also allowed additional help to flow in from many different sources.

It's as my colleague and friend Jim Possehl says, "When opportunity knocks on your door, it is not always a friendly or welcome sound." Hepatitis C was my gift—my opportunity to explore some dynamic health changes. I truly believed, within a year of my diagnosis, that I would live longer because of the choices I have made.

Determining Priorities

Because I do not know *how* I became infected with the *hepatitis C virus*, I do not know *when* the infection occurred. That made it more difficult to determine my disease progression. But the fact that I was diagnosed prior to developing any significant symptoms figured heavily into my decision-making.

I decided early on—being symptom-free—that my treatment goals were two-fold:

- to have good health as long as possible
- to rid my body of the hepatitis C virus

It has always important to me, however, that I never sacrifice the first goal for the second. It's a cornerstone of care that I encourage everyone encountering hepatitis C to consider building into his or her foundation. The other six suggestions I readily share:

- Gather all the information you can.
- Talk to and use the services of healthcare professionals from many different disciplines.
- Rely on your support network—and develop one if you need to.
- Make the choices that work best for you.
- Focus on your larger life—not just the illness.
- This journey is yours. Enjoy the moments and the meaning.

Exploring

“Whether you think you can or you think you can’t, you’re right.”
~Henry Ford

An Integrated Approach to Healing: The Best of Everything

At the time I began my journey through hepatitis C, I wasn’t familiar with the term *integrative medicine*. It refers to a multidimensional way of looking at health and healing that brings together Western medicine’s scientific model and Eastern approaches to health. Where western medicine has traditionally focused on the physical, an integrative approach emphasizes that we’re also emotional, spiritual, and mental beings. If we are to have true health, all these components must be considered, along with our cultural experiences, our environment, and the fact that our lives are forever changing.

Though I may not have known the term, that was the model I chose for myself. I simply thought of it as the power of the best of everything. It fit well with my personal philosophy of “navigating life” —a philosophy wrapped up in one of my favorite jokes.

A man was caught in a flood. The water was up to his waist when a boat came by. The people in the boat yelled, “Get in!” “No,” said the man. “I have lived my life as God desires. God will save me. Go help someone else.”

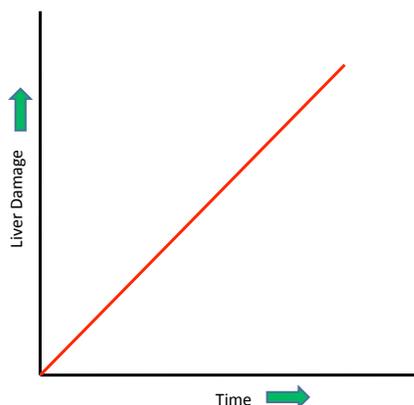
The water was up to his shoulders when a second boat came by. Once again, the people yelled, “Get in!” “No,” said the man. “I have lived my life as God desires. God will save me. Go help someone else.”

After a while, the water rose over the man’s head. Just then, a helicopter appeared and dropped a rope down to him. “No,” yelled the man over the rotors’ roar, “I have lived my life as God desires. God will save me. Go help someone else.”

A short time later, the man drowned. He arrived in Heaven, thoroughly confused and asking God, “What happened? I lived my entire life just the way I thought you wanted me to. Why didn’t you save me?” To which God replied, “Well, I tried! I sent two boats and a helicopter.”

So I started a journey using boats and helicopters, common sense, intuition, and the best advice experts had to offer. I integrated all the things we’ve been told are “optimal” but never wanted to consider: diet, exercise, stress management, supplements, positive mental attitude, juicing, yoga, *meditation*, and support. It didn’t take long for the answer to become obvious. *Live a health-centered lifestyle over an extended period of time and the effect is tremendously powerful.* Being an analyst at heart, I saw it like this (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Progression of Hepatitis C in an Individual Patient



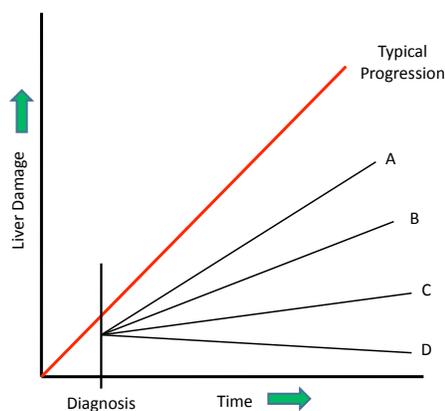
We know that, over time, the hepatitis C virus causes progressive liver damage. How quickly the disease progresses is variable. A person's general well-being, health habits, genetics, and many other factors come into play — which means that while the life span of someone with hepatitis C may well be affected, it is not with a precise calibration.

I know people who have lived with the hepatitis C virus for more than four decades and are still considered to be in phase I of the disease process. They may die with hepatitis C, but is unlikely the virus will be the primary cause of their demise. The reverse is true, as well. I have met people for whom the disease has progressed rapidly. I do not presume to know the factors involved in that process nor the outcome.

As to my own treatment for hepatitis C, I did not have a data baseline for tracking disease progression because I did not know when I became infected. Moreover, I had received divergent opinions from the doctors who read my liver biopsies, a frustration I'll expand upon later. Suffice it so say that the same biopsy garnered a stage 2 from one professional, and a stage 3 from another.

Since I didn't have certainty about where I was in terms of disease progression and I wasn't ready for interferon-based treatment, I focused my full attention on making those "optimal lifestyle changes." I wanted to find a natural way to rid my body of the virus. And I saw the opportunity to alter the course of the disease (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Altering the Progression of Hepatitis C With Lifestyle Changes



Knowing alcohol's negative effect on liver function, I could stop drinking (A). Knowing nutrition's positive effect on cellular restoration, I could improve my diet (B). And knowing how stress compromises natural *immunity*, I could exercise, practice relaxation, meditate, take supplements, have regular bodywork sessions, and more (C+D). Even if each of these changes improved my odds only a few percentage points, I reasoned that the cumulative effect could prove significant.

That was my theory going in.

The accuracy of my theory has been borne out in my experience.

I could sense my health was improving. And I was learning more all the time about how wellness works:

- The better you eat, the fewer supplements you need to take.
- All stress is not the same. Getting rid of the stress that comes from monotony and constant pressure—what I call “production line stress”—is good. Staying challenged and motivated can also create stress, but it's a positive force and can be balanced with relaxation, meditation, and exercise.
- There's no magic pill. Your system didn't get out of sync overnight, and it won't heal with a day or week of healthy living. It takes time, patience, and discipline to bring your body back into balance. But it's so worth it!

One of my doctors asked me why such a “normal guy” who studies all the data with such intensity “would try so many things on the outer edges of medicine?” My answer is simple: I follow what I call results-based medicine. When exploring options, I would ask about success rates (even if *anecdotal*), side effects, and the medical theory of why it works. Then I would make a decision to try it or not. If I did try it, I would track the results to see if my experience was congruent with the information I had received in advance. Since there is so much we don’t know, this was my way of navigating the journey.

Integrated Professional Care

Throughout my journey through hepatitis C, I have made decisions based on the best data I could get. It’s been my practice to correlate the results of my Western medicine tests with the findings of my acupuncturist, medical intuitive, chiropractor, and BioScan™ practitioner. When results have been similar, I felt confident in proceeding along that path. When they have conflicted, I took it as a “boat and helicopter” to keep investigating.

Western medicine has and continues to be an essential part of my treatment. It provided my diagnosis, which gave me the opportunity to make lifestyle changes, such as stopping alcohol. It has given me information—through successive liver biopsies and regular enzyme blood tests—of the damage done to my liver by the virus. And, as I’ll detail later, it offered the interferon-based treatment I elected eight years after my diagnosis.

In my opinion, Western medicine does the best job of gathering data regarding disease progression, how a person is affected by the disease, and the length of time between various disease stages. All of this information was and continues to be important to me as I monitor my health. This data/decision-making relationship is reflected in the appendix of this chapter, where I have shared my liver enzymes (*ALT* and *AST*) and viral load tests over time. My hope is that, in sharing this information, others will become more inclined to, as well.

My primary care doctor is an allopathic doctor (an MD) who practices integrative medicine. He has not only been very supportive of my treatment choices, but works with me actively to find alternative treatment options and to determine the efficacy of various treatments. The treatment approach I chose integrated Western, Chinese, homeopathic and naturopathic medicine, and various forms of bodywork. All of these have been supported and encouraged by my primary care physician.

As to the downside...

It’s sometimes difficult to determine whether a problem lies in the service or the system—and that’s certainly the case with Western medicine. I deeply disliked the fact that I could not obtain answers in a timely manner following my initial diagnosis. The first incident occurred immediately after learning I had the hepatitis C virus, when I was leaving the country for two weeks and wanted to speak with the specialist. After numerous calls to and promises from his office, he simply left a message with my wife to not worry and he’d see me when I returned. Once I was back, it took three weeks before he could see me, whereupon he told me my only real option was interferon-based therapy. He told me diet did not matter, despite everything I had read indicating the contrary. Ultimately, he agreed to *genotype* testing and I agreed to a liver biopsy.

The genotype test was not ordered. When I inquired why, his nurse replied that they had 50 people going through treatment they had only ordered one genotype test before. Today, it’s standard of care. But it points out how diligent you must be to make sure you’re getting the best of Western medicine.

The biopsy—described as a “routine” 15-minute procedure—resulted in internal bleeding requiring an overnight hospital stay. (Two subsequent biopsies, I must interject, went well.) Currently, a biopsy is the best way to measure your status and despite my complications, I would encourage everyone to get a biopsy if your doctor recommends it.

When the specialist called to discuss biopsy findings, he stated I should begin interferon-based treatment immediately. My response that I was still researching the best decision was met with his response that it was fine if I wanted to consider some “witchcraft remedies” but he wanted to see me and my plan in a month. Since the only “remedies” I’d mentioned had been diet and supplements, I was furious. But the anger was motivating, and for that I’m grateful.

I'm also frustrated by Western medicine's "missed opportunities." This is a discipline that relies on scientific evidence from *clinical trials*, surveys, case studies, and other research methods. The results and observations gathered determine which health practices and products are promoted or rejected. While there are numerous clinical trials involving medications to treat hepatitis C, these trials often fail to collect detailed information about participants' medical histories and lifestyles (diet, exercise, smoking history, nutritional supplements, etc.) that may well influence the course of the disease.

The fact is, we only know about 10 percent of what we need to know about hepatitis C, despite the fact that some tremendous people are working to fill the knowledge gaps. Currently, ALT levels are an indicator we have on which to gauge inflammatory activity—but they don't predict the degree of liver damage. Biopsies are the best procedure we have for gathering facts on disease staging—but I've had seven experts look at the same biopsy data and render very divergent opinions.

We simply do not have a perfect path.

In fact, the more one deals with and explores a long-term illness, the clearer it becomes that "errors and omissions" not only occur in treatment, but can reduce the number of options one sees. Physicians provide the best information they have based upon research conducted. But only a certain number of variables can be considered in the typical research effort. Whether drug Y was more effective because of study participants' nutritional differences or meditation practices is not information that's captured. But just because something hasn't been tested doesn't mean it doesn't work.

Western medicines are often studied against the *placebo* effect. As you're probably aware, the placebo effect is the actuality that a particular treatment works because you believe it will work, and therefore, contributes to your healing. Well, if what we want to do is heal ourselves of the hepatitis C virus, it only makes sense we would do whatever we can to enhance this placebo effect and make it more powerful. We can tell ourselves that a pill or herb will be effective and visualize it working in our bodies. Many times, I've had people tell me that a particular treatment was beneficial because of my mind. My response, "So what? It's about healing!"

I believe strongly these are calls we have to make, and actions we have to take, for ourselves.

Western medicine has been a constant of my care equation over the nine-plus years I've dealt with hepatitis C. I have worked with skilled and sensitive practitioners who understood my choice of merging allopathic and alternative treatments and offered guidance within that framework. I have encountered physicians who could not support my course of action and were not interested in the potential I saw. And I have met a few medical professionals whose manner left me feeling depersonalized and devalued.

How I choose to process those experiences is up to me.

I happen to believe in what I call the "95/5 rule." According to this rule, 95 percent of people are good and do their best to live life in a positive, supportive way. The remaining 5 percent do not. When we pay inordinate attention to the minority, we diminish the good of the majority and disempower ourselves.

The same holds true for practitioners caring for persons with hepatitis C. Although there are great differences of opinion on the optimal course of treatment, most are trying very hard to do their best for their patients; a small portion is not. While we can learn from each others' experiences, it's up to each of us to deal with the caregivers we encounter on our respective journeys.

I would urge you to be realistic about the time the typical Western medicine physician can allocate to you and your condition. Being a numbers guy, I did the math. On average, most internists have about 2,000 patient contact hours annually to spend with about 2,500 patients. That's about 45 minutes per patient per year for diagnosing and managing some 100-plus diseases. So, what is the likelihood that this individual can do so and be up to speed on all the latest and greatest treatments for hepatitis C?

If you are referred to a hepatitis specialist, you will get more answers. But there is much Western medicine does not yet know about the effects this virus has, given individual variations.

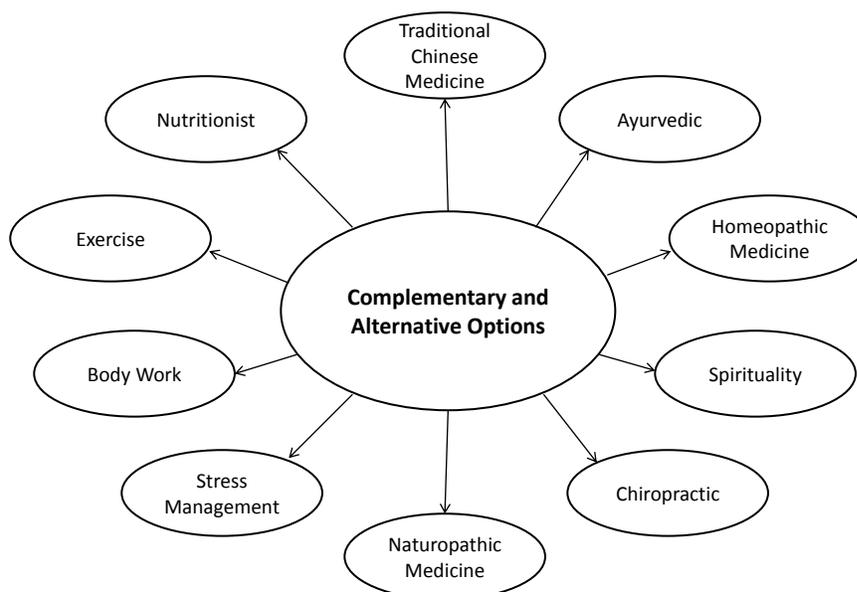
We are all learning together.

Complementary and Alternative Medicine

When I was first diagnosed with hepatitis C, I mentally grouped all *complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)* treatments together. The truth is, each is a distinct discipline in its own right (see Figure 4). If you are interested in the specific treatment modalities and my experiences with each, please visit www.hepcchallenge.org/randy.htm.

CAM was an essential part of my healing plan; I used CAM healing techniques every day in my journey. Because these methods focus on getting and keeping the body healthy and balanced, I advise every person dealing with hepatitis C to start his or her journey by exploring CAM options and choosing those that fit. Whether you are preparing to begin interferon-based treatment to rid your body of the virus or are simply working to maintain your health, CAM provides a variety of beneficial options from which to choose.

Figure 4. Complementary and Alternative Healing Options



All of the options shown in this diagram contribute to healing from a holistic perspective. Most practitioners strongly encourage those of us with hepatitis C to focus on all aspects of our lives. While we may be looking and hoping for a “magic” pill or herb, they know that ignoring other health factors will prove detrimental to our overall well-being. This can sometimes make us very uncomfortable.

The health plan I chose looked like this:

| NUTRITION | | |
|--|---|---|
| EAT | AVOID | SUPPLEMENTS |
| A balanced diet of: fruits vegetables fish turkey/chicken whole grains dairy (limited) | Foods and substances that tax liver function: red meat (beef/pork) fried foods refined sugar shellfish preservatives additives artificial sweeteners | As advised: multiple vitamin (no iron) omega-3 oils acidophilus vitamin C various other supplements from time to time |

BODYWORK AND EXERCISE

| Type | Frequency |
|--------------|-----------|
| acupuncture | weekly |
| energy work | weekly |
| chiropractic | bi-weekly |
| massage | monthly |
| running | daily |
| basketball | weekly |

I reasoned then—and affirm now—that anything that enhances my ability to manage disease and gives me greater energy is a positive. The other aspect that I appreciate is that these forms of healing require me to deal with all aspects of my health, not just hepatitis C.

The downside of CAM approaches is that there is little scientific testing or documentation about the effects of the various prescribed treatments. There are few clinical trials, and some CAM practitioners do not keep statistics on their patients. This lack of scientific data makes it difficult for many Western doctors to believe in or recommend CAM treatments, regardless of how beneficial they may be.

Over the past nine years, I’ve had countless calls and encounters relating to CAM success stories for curing hepatitis C. I always ask that the “cured” individual contact me and share their medical records. To date, I’ve had no response. Some of these *anecdotes* have come from CAM practitioners promoting a particular course of treatment. When I suggested we survey their patients and medical records to document these outcomes, their interest evaporated. Many CAM practitioners judge the efficacy of a given therapy according to how the person is feeling. Depending on the situation, this may or may not be an accurate reflection of disease progression.

Spiritual Practice

If there is an ultimate gift of my journey through hepatitis C, it is my spiritual development. I have never been a religious man, but I have always believed there is a universal spiritual power. Ironically, I had begun a prayer practice just prior to being diagnosed with hepatitis C, primarily to help someone I cared about who was sick.

After my diagnosis, I found many of the books I read and most of the healthcare practitioners I saw spoke of developing a spiritual practice. I did so, but not because I was afraid of dying. For within a month or so of my diagnosis, I began

to understand I could live with this disease for a long time. My choice came more from a desire to heal, and once I got started, it took on a life of its own.

My spiritual practice includes a range of approaches, all of which integrate mind, body, and soul. I practice various forms of qi gong, a Chinese movement method that develops one spiritual sense. I also practice two forms of yoga. Ashtanga yoga is a rather strenuous form that is intended to realign and detoxify the physical body. The poses require a focused concentration that brings the mind and body into sync. Bikram yoga is practiced in a heated room to facilitate profuse sweating. The heat is used to bring about deeper stretching, prevent injuries, and reduce stress and tension. Bikram yoga is designed to build strength, flexibility, balance, and mental focus. In addition to these forms, I also meditate at times, using either an “aah” or “ohm” sound.

Spirituality has opened my eyes to a world I barely knew existed before. I believe each person has his or her own spiritual journey. I also believe that the type of spirituality one practices is less important than the fact that it works for you and allows you to continue growing.

When you open up to spirituality, things happen that do not seem logical or rational— especially to the “normal guy, normal job, normal life” type of person I am. I’m choosing to share some here specifically because I think there are many of us who may discount the importance of these messages. And I really believe paying attention to them helps us to tune into our lives and our healing.

The first experience that shook me up was a dream. In it, another person and I are digging up a man who died of liver disease. He had been buried in the 1950s. As we reach the part of the grave that holds the casket, I see a piece of paper on top. As I reach for it, a ghost comes out of the casket, grabs me by the ankles, carries me across a room, and dumps me on a couch. I turn to the ghost and ask, “Are you mad at me?” The ghost says, “No.” I then ask if it’s trying to help me, and get an affirmative answer. Then the ghost says, “Take this.” When I ask what it is, the spirit responds, “Bee propolis.”

I knew when I woke this was no ordinary dream. So clear...so vivid...and I was so freaked out. I was up in mountains at the time, but checked the Internet for information on bee propolis when I returned. The first article explained it is the substance bees use to fight off viruses. I immediately knew this was no accident.

So I went to the natural foods store and purchased every kind of bee propolis I could find. I took them to my medical intuitive/naturopath and my BioScan™ practitioner. Both confirmed that I should be taking it. Other than vitamin C, it is the only substance that is always part of their recommended protocol.

My sense is that the dream has more to tell me. But I’m waiting.

This was one of the first synchronicities I link directly to developing my spiritual nature. Another happened during a meditation. I’d been told that if you pray with emotion, it has a greater effect, and I decided to give it a try. I began praying with deep emotion, and my body began shaking all over. I could stop the shaking by stopping my meditation... but when I resumed, so did the shaking.

It was clear to me that this, too, was no accident. I have incorporated this shaking meditation into my spiritual work. I can now begin it simply by breathing deeply.

Treating

“Things turn out best for people who make the best of the way things turn out.”
~John Wooden

When summarizing my experience for the 2005 edition of Hepatitis C Choices, I wrote, “For now, I have chosen to hold off on interferon-based therapy. This may be a mistake, but the decision is very clear to me at this time.”

The following year, I made a different choice. Why? Because I started getting new boats and helicopters.

Practitioners began sharing new information. Fellow hepatitis C patients started telling me new experiences. Where all my indicators had pointed to not treating before, they now shifted to “yes.”

Pre-Treatment

As I actively considered interferon-based treatment, I saw what an advantage I had gained. For eight years, I had been living an extremely healthy lifestyle. Actively integrating the best of Western and CAM approaches had brought me to a point where my body felt strong and my mind ready.

I want to note, this advance preparation was the key point of consensus reached by the multidisciplinary medical brainstorming group assembled by the Caring Ambassadors Hepatitis C Program. The team now referred to it as “setting the table” and acknowledged that this practical prescription could benefit virtually every patient with a long-term disease considering treatment intervention.

Getting ready for interferon-based treated, I kicked it up a notch:

- Thirty days before beginning treatment, I adjusted my work schedule to my “new normal” of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.—two to three hours shorter than typical.
- I focused on keeping my *immune system* in great shape through excellent nutrition and took key vitamins and supplements (i.e., omega-3 oils, acidophilus, vitamins C and E).
- I exercised regularly and maintained my body weight.
- I received regular body and energy work treatments.
- I worked on making sure my mind wanted the treatment to succeed.

In short, I did everything possible to connect my mind, body, and spirit. My intention was to have nothing in my life that did not support the medicines working for the optimal outcome. Some actions were symbolic—such as writing “PURE LOVE” on the syringes I used to inject the interferon. It was my way of intentionally working to enhance the placebo effect. Others were relational — assuring my family members and colleagues that this was simply the next step in my journey and all would be well.

And I knew in my heart it would.

Treatment

I received combination interferon plus *ribavirin* treatment for 42 weeks—from September 2006 through June 2007. My physician advised me to continue the therapy for six additional weeks, but I chose to end it at the nine-month mark. By then, it had been 36 weeks since my viral load had become undetectable. For me, it was time to stop.

As with so many of my hepatitis C decisions, this one was multifactoral. I could tell my toxicity levels were rising and that my body needed relief. My internal guidance system told me the objective had been achieved, something my medical intuitive confirmed. Moreover, I had a running tally of viral-load report levels — western Medicine’s best indicator of treatment efficacy — for visual proof.

Wanting to make my results and experience part of the knowledge base for hepatitis C study, I had viral-load measurements at 24 hours after the first treatment and each week, thereafter. Ideally, one would like to see a 100-fold drop after four weeks and undetectable virus at 12 weeks. My viral loads through treatment are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Randy's Viral Load Results Through the First 6 Weeks of Treatment

| Timing with Treatment | Viral Load: (IU/mL) |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| (started treatment) | 6,315,680 |
| (+ 16 hrs) | 2,069,030 |
| (+ 1 week) | 63,930 |
| (+ 2 weeks) | 3,640 |
| (+ 3 weeks) | 310 |
| (+ 4 weeks) | 60 |
| (+ 5 weeks) | 10 |
| (+ 6 weeks) | undetectable |
| (+ 42 weeks) (treatment stopped) | undetectable |
| (+ 66 weeks) | undetectable |
| (+ 92 weeks) | undetectable |

I experienced what is referred to as a rapid viral response, or RVR. Whether my RVR was because of genetics, “setting the table,” spirituality, prayer, using the power of the mind (enhancing the placebo effect), or a combination of all of these — we may never know. However, I would highly encourage anyone going on treatment to employ each of these and others they discover on their journey.

Those who choose interferon-based therapy report a wide range of side effects from the treatment. I would classify mine as moderate, with some days being very difficult and all requiring management. Specifically, I:

- *Chose Thursdays for my injections*, knowing I could use weekend time to regain energy for the following week.
- *Remained active* but adjusted whatever I was doing to the appropriate level. Basketball is my sport, and I played regularly. However, I could only stay in the game for approximately three minutes at a time. At the beginning of treatment, my goal was to still run 10 miles a week; that ultimately changed to walking.
- *Focused on getting sufficient sleep* and became a sofa-lounging sitcom watcher for the first and only time in my life.
- *Ate an extremely healthy diet*—no alcohol or preservatives; fresh foods, whenever possible; primarily vegetables, fruits, whole grains, lean meats, and key supplements.
- *Forced myself to go to work*. I love what I do. I work with great people in an exciting company. But there were days when getting there at 9 and staying until 5 was tough. But I can't overemphasize how important it was to have a reason to get up and stay active.
- *Connected with friends and family*. My wife and kids were amazing, and their support gave me an unbelievable amount of energy. I continued coaching youth sports throughout treatment and engaging socially as much as possible.
- *Acknowledged the toxic effects of treatment on my emotions*. I'm generally quite laid-back, and I found myself getting angry more often and easily. Relaxation and spirituality helped immensely in this regard.
- *Avoided the “downward spiral.”* It's easy for any of us to let things slide when we're not feeling well. I worked hard to maintain my structure—work, family, service, relaxation, spirituality. I encourage you to keep life in balance as best you can during this time. The more you help yourself, the more powerful you become to help others.

Post-Treatment

I would love to say everything returned to normal the moment I stopped taking my treatment medications. Not true. In fact, the post-treatment period of my hepatitis C journey brought some new and unexpected challenges.

- **I felt worse.** My *metabolism* was affected and I had lost muscle tone—both of which affected my performance. I maintained the same diet as before treatment, but my appetite was affected.
- **I had to adjust my exercise program.** I started training using the Jeff Galloway method of beginning slowly and increasing one's pace/distance on a weekly schedule. Instead of running, I began walking. Interestingly, each time I upped my activity level, I could feel the “detox effect.” It was like a delayed drug response as the toxins were released.
- **Naturally ridding my body of toxins took more time than I anticipated.** My healthcare practitioners urged me to not rush this process.
- **Some things were better.** I was far less emotional. I could feel my energy growing. And at six months, tests showed no virus.

I was also extremely fortunate to not have some of the long-term side effects some have with interferon-based treatment. My thyroid function remains normal by Western medicine standards but is a little slow according to my complementary medicine practitioners. No other systems have been negatively affected.

Living

“Luck is what you have left over after you give 100 percent.”
~Langston Coleman

My Life Now

Today, I am 52 and healthy. Western medical tests nine months post-treatment showed my body had cleared the hepatitis C virus and my CAM practitioners concurred. Now, the only “souvenir” I have is the fact that my life and the way I live it will never be the same.

My lifestyle choices remain much the same as during my journey to health. More than 80 percent of the time, I follow the same nutrition plan I outlined earlier. I did, however, recently enjoy my first glass of wine in nine years and now drink alcohol in moderation.

I am not big on giving unsolicited advice. But when someone with hepatitis C asks me for my best thinking on charting their journey, here's my response:

- If you want to get rid of the virus, get as healthy as possible. Set the table. This is the foremost finding of the Caring Ambassadors Hepatitis C Program team of western and eastern healthcare practitioners.
- Understand the effect the virus is having on your body.
- If you can't stop drinking, focus there first.
- Get your body weight to a healthy level. Even modest weight loss will help.
- Don't use marijuana to reduce side effects. To take into the body something we know compromises immunity defies logic.
- Do the things that make common sense and you know will make you healthier.
- Use your intuition. Listen and watch for your own “boats and helicopters.”

10 Truths

For all we now understand about hepatitis C, there is much we do not. I personally believe that each journey shared strengthens the collective knowledge base and makes the path slightly smoother for those affected, and their families and friends. My attempt to distill the essential lessons I've learned over the past nine-plus years since my diagnosis has yielded the following "top 10" list.

To borrow from the words of Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, I hold these truths about living with hepatitis C to be self-evident:

1. It's all about the immune system! We know the immune system is the body's defense against viruses. We also know that much of the liver damage occurring with chronic hepatitis C is mediated by the immune system. It follows, therefore, that anything we can do to enhance the function of this system is potentially helpful and anything that impairs its function is potentially harmful. A note of caution: It's easy to fall into the pattern of thinking that if a little immune enhancement is good, a lot must be better. Not true. Excessive vitamins, supplements, herbs and even exercise can have a negative impact. Best bet? Moderation.
2. You are what you eat. This is a fact of life. With the help of our liver, our bodies transform what we eat and drink into the very substance of our physical selves. While we may want to think that what we ingest doesn't matter, logic and basic biology say otherwise.
3. Stress management is crucial. Scientists have known for decades that stress depresses immune function. And, to revisit #1, anything that interferes with that function is potentially detrimental to people with hepatitis C. Recognizing and managing your stressors is an important way to influence your course and condition.
4. Protect your liver. The liver processes virtually every substance that enters the human body. Every step you take to decrease the demands on that vital organ while it is under siege from the hepatitis C virus is potentially helpful. You can protect your liver by eating a healthy diet, eliminating alcohol, limiting your intake of complex chemicals (such as medications and supplements), and avoiding toxins such as smoke, pollutants and chemicals.
5. Time is on your side. For the vast majority of people, chronic hepatitis C is a disease that progresses very slowly. With the exception of those diagnosed with advanced *cirrhosis*, it is not an immediate threat to one's life, nor will it become one. In no way am I minimizing the challenges of living with hepatitis C. I do, however, want to emphasize the most people with the virus have time to make choices about how to manage their disease and change their lifestyle.
6. You are as you think. As with all life experiences, your outlook, perceptions and attitudes influence your journey through hepatitis C. No one wants this virus. But if you have been diagnosed, you are now free to choose how you will react to it. Don't be surprised if your emotions range widely in the beginning—from anger and fear to helplessness and shame. But over time, staying in the negative can make living more difficult. Keep in mind there's no "good" or "bad" feeling. What's important is now they add to or detract from your sense of well-being.
7. Body and mind work in tandem. The more I worked with the CAM modalities, the better I understood how healing takes everything we are and have. We cannot separate how we think, act and feel. If you have not read Bill Moyers' book *Healing and the Mind*, the transcripts of his PBS interview series on the subject, I strongly encourage you to.
8. Information can be healing. Knowledge is power. In fact, I've learned since my diagnosis that information is a very real antidote to fear. So search fearlessly. Do be wise, however, that there are many unsubstantiated claims about so-called cures. Make sure the information you gather—whether from the Internet, library or your own contacts—is reliable. With that said, don't let your quest for facts and findings take over your life. Moderation...there's that word again.
9. Support helps. My journey has been made much easier because my wife, kids, extended family, friends, and colleagues have been there for me. I can count on these people, and they can count on me. Some people draw the same strength from hepatitis C support groups. My own support group experience — which I admit was very

limited—left me feeling less supported and more singled out because of the collective mood. Knowing myself, I knew I could not afford to spend a minute in the victim role. I understand some groups can be very helpful. For me, in the sessions I attended, the victim mentality promoted was not healthy. You will need to figure out what works best for you.

10. There is no magic bullet. When first diagnosed, I was certain I could find a medicine or treatment that would clear the virus from my body with no pain and no interruption to my life. It doesn't work that way...at least for now. Like most of the long-term illnesses affecting millions of individuals worldwide, living with hepatitis C requires us to make some difficult choices and changes. The good news is, when you accept your responsibilities with this condition, you are rewarded with a renewed sense of control and self-determination.

Sharing

**"We make a living by what we get,
but we make a life by what we give."
~Winston Churchill**

There was a time when I very much wanted hepatitis C to be something I was a victim of, not something I was responsible for. That's changed. And along with a shifting sense of responsibility came an awareness that I was on this path for a reason.

And that I was supposed to share what I found along the way.

It's why I've made my ALT, AST and viral load test results public and why the CAM treatments I explored are detailed on the Caring Ambassadors Hepatitis C Program Internet site (www.HepCChallenge.org).

I strongly encourage you to do the same.

No other journey will be like yours.

The world needs to hear your story.

Recommended Reading

Love, Medicine and Miracles, Siegel, Bernie, MD., HarperCollins Publishers. New York, NY. 1986.

Why People Don't Heal and How they Can, Myss, Caroline, Ph.D., Three Rivers Press, New York, NY. 1997.

Healing and The Mind, Moyers, Bill, Doubleday, New York, NY. 1993.