

Beating Prostate Cancer During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Paul Nguyen, MD, is a medical oncologist at Dana-Farber/Brigham and Women's Cancer Center (DF/BWCC).

In late March, Bill G., a biotech CEO from West Roxbury, MA, began 2 months of radiation treatment for advanced prostate cancer at Dana-Farber/Brigham and Women's Cancer Center (DF/BWCC). At that time, the COVID-19 pandemic had started to surge in Massachusetts.

“I had a number of conversations with my wife about whether to postpone my treatment,” says Bill. “We were concerned that if we delayed treatment, the cancer might spread. We ultimately decided to continue radiation treatment because DF/BWCC felt like a safe place for patients who needed to visit the hospital during the pandemic.”

Safety Measures to Protect Patients

Each day Bill arrived at the Department of Radiation Oncology for treatment, he was screened for symptoms of respiratory illness. He was also given a face mask, urged to wash his hands often and asked to keep at least 6 feet of separation from others. It was safety measures like these that allowed hundreds of cancer patients like Bill to continue their treatment at Brigham and Women's Hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To limit the number of people onsite at one time, the Brigham also changed its visitor policy. “Usually, there are crowds of people in the hospital,” says Bill. “But in March and April, the hospital was sparsely occupied, which made it easy to keep my distance.” Bill ate breakfast in the hospital's cafeteria every morning. He says the tables were spaced over 10 feet apart and staff sprayed them with disinfectant after they had been used.

State-of-the-Art Radiation Treatment for Prostate Cancer

To treat his prostate cancer, Bill's radiation oncologist, Paul Nguyen, MD, recommended 38 rounds of daily treatments with intensity modulated radiation therapy (IMRT). The cutting-edge cancer therapy took 3-D images of Bill's pelvic area and then delivered precise radiation to tumors while minimizing exposure to surrounding tissues.

“The treatment sessions were only about 10 minutes long,” says Bill. “I didn't see or feel anything while I was laying in the machine. From the other room, the radiation therapist provided a calming voice on the speaker and played relaxing music in the background.”

Each week, Bill checked in with Dr. Nguyen virtually to monitor his progress and address any concerns or questions. Bill says the conversations were friendly and warm. He felt well-informed about safety measures or policy changes and that Dr. Nguyen deeply cared about him and his condition.

Staying Connected While Physical Distancing

Bill says his most memorable experiences at the Brigham were with patients who were awaiting their cancer treatments. The spacious waiting area in the Department of Radiation Oncology had been modified to ensure physical distancing, but that didn't stop Bill and other patients from making connections.

“We were wearing masks and sitting far apart from each other, but I developed real friendships with other patients,” says Bill. “We talked about our conditions and shared stories about our work and families. We also watched the news on the television. The pandemic brought us closer together. We were all in the same boat.”

Cancer-Free and Enjoying Time at Home with Family

When Bill finished his last treatment in mid-April, his prostate-specific antigen (PSA) levels were normal. Cancer-free, Bill continues to monitor his PSA levels with his providers and plans to meet virtually with Dr. Nguyen for the foreseeable future.

Bill continues to manage his biotech company remotely from the comfort of his home. This fall, he and his daughter plan to run the Marine Corp Marathon in Washington, DC. “I still need to be cautious during the pandemic, so I'm enjoying being at home with my wife and children who say they've never seen me happier,” says Bill.