



‘Sometimes you do have to step on toes’

After misdiagnosis, woman urges patients to speak up

BY JACKIE FARWELL
BDN STAFF

For Ronald Scott of Washburn, the crippling headaches first took hold in January. Lacking an accurate diagnosis for months, he eventually suffered so intensely that the 78-year-old Air Force veteran contemplated the most drastic form of relief.

“He said, ‘If I had a gun, I would shoot myself. The pressure in my head is so bad,’” his daughter, Tammi Scott Easler, recalls.

His doctor suspected a bad vertebra in Scott’s back and prescribed Tramadol, a narcotic painkiller, “like M&Ms,” Easler said. The headaches persisted over the next few months, often confining Scott to bed.

Then came another diagnosis — allergies. He had his ears flushed, to no avail.

In June, Easler received a call that her father had collapsed on his doorstep. He was transported to the hospital, complaining of a headache and weakness on his life side. He hadn’t suffered a stroke, the doctors told Easler, so Scott was sent home.

Shortly after, he fell and broke his hip, winding up back in the hospital, she said. When staff or visitors approached the left side of his hospital bed, he failed to notice or respond, Easler said. Concerned, she pushed for a CT scan.

The results were crushing. “He had stage four brain cancer, with a tumor over his right eye,” Easler said.

On July 17, just months after the headaches began, Scott died.

Easler acknowledges the terminal illness unavoidably would have claimed her father’s life, but the delayed diagnosis still cost him dearly, she said.

“I don’t think it would have changed the outcome, my dad would have passed away,” she said. “But I really feel that had people listened and taken the extra step to see why this man is having headaches, maybe the last two months of his life would have been less painful for him.”

Hospital staff told her they never would have performed the CT scan without her insistence, Easler said.

“You have to advocate, and sometimes you do have to step on toes to make people listen to you because it’s the only way you get their attention,” she said.

According to a sweeping new report, most people will receive a wrong or delayed diagnosis at least once during their lives, sometimes with “devastating consequences.” While diagnostic mistakes are much more common than medication mix-ups, infections or other health care errors, “they have been largely unappreciated within the quality and patient safety movements in health care,” wrote the independent panel of medical experts who authored the Institute of Medicine report, “Improving Diagnosis in Health Care.”

The institute, part of the National Academy

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HECTOR CASANOVA | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Follow these steps to reduce the odds of a misdiagnosis

The new Institute of Medicine report, “Improving Diagnosis in Health Care,” offers these suggestions for patients:

- Be clear, complete, and accurate when you tell your clinician about your illness. When did your symptoms start? What made them better or worse? Write down notes and bring them with you to your appointment.
- Remember which treatments you’ve tried in the past, if they helped, and what, if any, side effects you had.
- Keep your own records of test results, referrals and hospital admissions and an accu-

rate list of your medications. Bring the list with you to the doctor’s office or pharmacy.

- Ask these three questions at your appointment: What could be causing my problem? What else could it be? When will I get my test results, and what should I do to follow up?
- Ask what to expect from any treatment and what you should do if you get new symptoms or start to feel worse.
- Don’t be afraid to ask, “What else could this be?” and encourage your clinicians to think about other possible reasons for your illness.

Can yoga save an addict’s life?

For 20 years, Angela Weymouth watched her brother struggle with opiate addiction.

She and her husband, Michael Seymour, own Maine Hatha Yoga on Dartmouth Street in Portland. Since they first opened in 2002, they’ve known that people with substance abuse issues take their yoga classes. But only recently did some share their personal stories.

“In the past three or four years,” said Angela, “individuals have told me this practice pretty much saved their life as they tried to recover from severe addiction.”

One of them, Kelly Benson, became a yoga instructor at the studio. She used to live on the streets in Boston. She’d been in and out of treatment and detox centers a dozen times trying to get off heroin. The last time she was in rehab, she experienced yoga for the first time. It helped save her life.

“She told me early on that she was using yoga in combination with therapy to detox from severe opiate addiction,” Angela said. “She decided it was so powerful that she was going to become a yoga teacher.”

Kelly tells her story in a short video she made for the Bangor Daily News’ Recovery Project.

Maine Hatha Yoga teaches hot yoga. The room is kept at about 100 degrees and the humidity about 30 to 45 percent.

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DIANE ATWOOD

Can you treat psychological problems naturally?

Last week I reviewed the book “Anatomy of an Epidemic,” which covers the

huge increases in mental health problems in our culture, especially in children. The author suggests a big part of the problem is the very drugs used to treat such conditions. While some patients seem to respond

well to long-term use of psychiatric medications, for most they significantly worsen the patient’s overall mental health after a few months, the author found.

What are the alternatives to these medications? Not surprisingly, they involve natural, drug-free treatments, which have been used for centuries. For example, exercise has been shown to be very effective, especially against depression. In the U.K., not only do doctors regularly prescribe exercise, but there is community-wide support for the treatment. Unlike medications, which have serious side effects, exercise has side benefits — weight loss, lower blood pressure, improved sleep, more social engagement and most importantly overcoming the feeling that one is a helpless victim of the disease.

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MICHAEL NOONAN

Free testing for STDs today in Portland

PORTLAND — Planned Parenthood of Northern New England will offer free testing for sexually transmitted diseases 8:30 a.m.-7 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 29, at the Planned Parenthood of Northern New England Portland Health Center, 443 Congress St., second floor.

Tests for chlamydia, gonorrhea and HIV will be available to patients and walk-ins throughout the day. Women, men and teens are encouraged to stop by the health center and get tested.

The event is designed to promote sexual health and address the disproportionately high rates of sexually transmitted diseases among people under age 25.

The event is part of National Pink Out Day, a celebration of Planned Parenthood.

Mind Body Spirit Festival set for Belfast

BELFAST — A Mind Body Spirit Festival will take place 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 3, at the University of Maine Hutchinson Center, 81 Belmont Ave.

The event will feature holistic health practitioners, reflexology, massage therapy, Reiki and other energy healing modalities, crystals, gems and jewelry, readings from psychic and mediums and intuitive life coaches, an animal communicator, medical intuitive, aura photography, empowerment workshops and more.

Admission is \$5 and includes most workshops. A portion of the proceeds will benefit Habitat for Humanity of Waldo County.

For information, visit mindbodyspiritfestival.org or call 649-2386.

Free training on supporting LGBT youth

ROCKLAND — A “Supporting Families, Supporting Youth: Working with LGBT Youth and their Families” workshop will be held 9 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Friday, Oct. 2, at First Unitarian Universalist Church, 345 Broadway. Registration begins at 8:30 a.m.

Join colleagues from around the region for this training on working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. This free program is geared toward a range of providers — primary care, mental health, behavioral health, educators, community and clergy — who work with LGBT youth and their families. Presenters will include staff from the state Center for Disease Control and NAMI Maine.

Participants can receive a certificate for contact hours for continuing education.

To register visit www.nami-maine.org/events/event_details.asp?id=671773.

Mental Health Awareness Conference on Oct. 3

BREWER — Dr. Thomas Jensen of San Diego, medical director of the International Bipolar Foundation, will be featured at the third annual Mental Health Awareness Conference, 8:30 a.m. to noon Saturday, Oct. 3, at Machias Savings Bank on Wilson Street, sponsored by NAMI Bangor.

The theme is “Ask the Expert,” and participants will have the opportunity to ask Jensen questions about any topic related to mental health.

There is no cost, but attendees are asked to bring nonperishable food items for the Brewer Area Food Cupboard in lieu of a participation fee.

For information or to register, call Tammy Kalel at 299-6855.

We need to tell you something (and you’re going to love it!):

In two weeks, this section of your Bangor Daily News will become Business.

It will be a more prominent section with a focus on Maine’s business scene.

Columnist Deb Neuman will appear here, alongside features that will help readers navigate financial issues and decisions.

