

Yale CANCER
CENTER
answers

WNPR Connecticut Public Radio



Hosts

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Surviving and Thriving: A Patient's
Perspective

Guest Expert:
Dr. Mel Goldstein

Yale Cancer Center Answers

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Welcome to Yale Cancer Center Answers with Drs. Ed Chu and Francine Foss, I am Bruce Barber. Dr. Chu is Deputy Director and Chief of Medical Oncology at Yale Cancer Center and an internationally recognized expert on colorectal cancer. Dr. Foss is a Professor of Medical Oncology and Dermatology and she is an expert in the treatment of lymphomas. If you would like to join in the discussion, you can contact the doctors directly. The address is canceranswers@yale.edu and the phone number is 1888-234-4YCC. This evening Ed Chu welcomes TV meteorologist Dr. Mel Goldstein. Dr. Mel was diagnosed with multiple myeloma 13 years ago and has kept a positive outlook throughout. He has continued to broadcast his morning weather reports while becoming a vocal advocate for cancer research and care.

Chu Dr. Mel it's a great pleasure and honor for us to have you on the show this evening.

Goldstein Dr. Chu, I can't tell you the honor that I feel. When I was diagnosed with this disease, we are talking 13 years ago now, the median length of survival was 2-1/2 years and here it is 13 years later and you and I are talking, and we are such good friends.

Chu It really has been a remarkable journey, and I have to say, I always enjoy being on the show with you talking about cancer survivorship and the importance of cancer research.

Goldstein The advances have been huge, absolutely huge. Nobody wants cancer. Cancer is a terrible disease. There is no way of describing it any other way, nobody wants cancer, but I have to say that today, with the treatments that we have available to us, there is a whole new life for us. There is a whole new life that we never had before. Thirteen years ago, I had options of chemo or more chemo, but now, we have targeted treatments. We have new developments that are extending people's lives longer than anybody ever thought possible, people are living longer, they are living better, they are feeling better, and they are seeing their families grow up. It is just a remarkable time.

Chu Dr. Mel, I'm going to take us back a little bit so that we can tell our listeners who may not be familiar with your story, 13 years ago, when you were first given the diagnosis of cancer, what kind of cancer you were diagnosed with? And also, as you know, a lot of times when people are given the diagnosis of cancer they are scared, they are frightened, and in some cases, they feel like it may be a death sentence that has been placed upon them. So take us through what you were going through when you were first diagnosed with the cancer.

Goldstein I will tell you, I had tremendous pain in my back and that was my symptom, very-very bad back pain, and who would think that back pain has anything to do with cancer; I didn't certainly. I went to various doctors, I went to orthopedic specialists, I went to chiropractors, and nobody could seem to pin down exactly what it was that I was dealing with. Eventually, blood work was done and it was found that in my blood I had these abnormal proteins

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which are cancer cells, and these cancer cells were growing at a tremendous rate. A biopsy was done of my bone marrow and 85%, Dr. Chu, 85% of my bone marrow was covered with cancer at that time. And do you know that today, 13 years later, there are no cancer cells in that bone marrow.

Chu You have had a remarkable journey and just to drill down the specific type of cancer you have, it is called multiple myeloma.

Goldstein Yeah, it's called multiple myeloma and it is related to the abnormal growth of certain proteins that crowd out the good proteins that keep your immune system intact. It is the type of protein that will slowly deteriorate the bones in your vertebrae, for example. I have had every vertebrae in my back either broken or shattered over the years and I have shrunk 7 to 8 inches. To think of that people say, oh, Dr. Mel, you must have had a lot of pain, it must have been very difficult for you. Of course there is pain involved, the types of treatments that we now have available to us can alleviate not just the pain, but really get at the source of the cancer itself and once you get at the source of the cancer, the pain is going to go away as well. I am walking 2 miles everyday. Dr. Chu, I have never been better.

Chu And I have to say, you have never looked better.

Goldstein Thank you.

Chu When people are given this diagnosis of cancer, a lot of times they get very down or negative, but you are the complete opposite of that. You are always upbeat, you are always very positive, you are very enthusiastic. Can you tell our listeners the secret to that success?

Goldstein Yes, this is key to dealing with ones cancer. I feel you have to have a lot of faith. Faith is important. I put that number 1 on my list. If you have a lot of faith, you have energy to go about your day and start thinking clearly about what you have to do to make yourself better, and there are ways that you can do that. The way that you go about making yourself feel better is finding the best care possible, and I was fortunate at Yale to come and have oncologists who understood this disease very well. I remember going to my doctor and saying, how am I going to go from this disease and the answer was, well where are you going? You are not going anywhere; you are going to be here. You have got to have that energy to find the very best there is. Now, when Yale didn't have exactly what I needed, I went to Cleveland, I went to Boston, I went to West Virginia, I went to wherever I had to go to try to find the right exact treatment for what was zeroing in on my immune system and attacking me, and you cannot be content by just going to the doctor down the street.

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Chu Dr. Mel, how did you do that? Did you work with your physicians at Yale to find these different places?

Goldstein Absolutely, and this is one of the unique things about Yale. If they don't have it, they will get it and they will find it for you. I needed to be on a particular trial for a brand new drug and the first drug that I was on was called thalidomide. It is a drug with a reputation of being very-very serious; it caused a lot of birth defects back in the 50s and 60s, but those characteristics that cut off the blood supply to growing fetuses, also cut off blood supply to growing cancer cells, and I saw the possibility in this, so I went to my doctor and I said can we do this? It was purely experimental and there were 25 people who were doing this in Arkansas and we managed somehow to get this drug and to try to figure out what the dose level should be, which was very difficult to do because it was so experimental, but after 2 years, it worked really well. Then there was a derivative, a new kind of targeted therapy that was derived from the thalidomide called Revlimid, and we did not have it at Yale at the time, but Dr. DeVita, who was the head of Yale Cancer Center at the time said, look, I want you to go up to Boston because they are working on a trial with Revlimid and it seems to be doing pretty well. It was a phase 1 trial, and phase 1 trials are very vigorous, I don't recommend phase 1 trials unless you really, really want it, and I really really wanted it. But phase 1 trials are pretty harsh, and so, I went on a phase 1 trial, there were 25 of us in the whole country and the results were phenomenal. Over a very short period of time my cancer level went down 50%, and I have been on that same drug Revlimid ever since, and we are talking at least 10 years and it has had some remarkable results for me, it has kept me alive, but it is because of the cooperation that you find among good doctors. You might say, I am a little bit hesitant to get a second opinion because I don't want to insult the doctor, he is a very good doctor and I like the doctor a lot, but if a doctor is worth anything at all, the doctor will want to learn about new methods, new techniques, and new medications. So by all means, this is what you should be seeking out and the good doctors here at Yale really encourage you to do that, but as time goes on, everything changes, and with the Smilow Cancer Hospital coming along at Yale I think there is going to be less and less traveling of Dr. Mel and other people because we are going to have such facilities here.

Chu I always love to see you first thing in the morning when you come and visit us in the clinic. But that is an important message that you raised Dr. Mel, and that is I always hear from patients and friends and family members that sometimes they are reluctant to approach their doctor and say maybe I should seek a second or third opinion, and I think there is a brotherhood, and we all work very closely together and at the end of the day, it is what is in the best interest of the patient.

Goldstein That is exactly right, and this is what we try to do and this is what we strive to do. My goal

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in life is to give hope to other cancer patients. I feel that there is a future for us, there are ways of dealing with our cancers that we never had before and cancer certainly is something that now we don't necessarily want to have, but is something we are going to be able to live with better and live longer and more fulfilling lives than ever thought possible before.

Chu Certainly Dr. Mel, you are living proof of all the advances that have been made in cancer research and certainly you practice what you preach.

Goldstein Don't stop, that is my advice. That is the chief advice that I have for other people, so please don't stop. Keep going. No matter what your diagnosis is. Thank God for every day and make the best of what that day has to offer.

Chu On that note, we are going to take a break for a medical minute. You are listening to Yale Cancer Center Answers and I am here in the studio this evening with our guest expert, Dr. Mel Goldstein, weatherman extraordinaire who is with us today not discussing his favorite topic, which is weather, but rather sharing his very compelling story of cancer survivorship.

*Medical
Minute*

Here in Connecticut, the American Cancer Society estimates that almost a thousand people will be diagnosed with colorectal cancer every month. The good news is that when you detect it early, colorectal cancer is easily treated and highly curable. It means that if you are over the age of 50, you should have regular colonoscopies to screen for this disease. In the case of patients who develop colorectal cancer, there are more options than ever before, thanks to increased access to advanced therapies and specialized care. Clinical trials are currently under way at Federally Designated Comprehensive Cancer Centers like the one at Yale to test innovative new treatments for colorectal cancer. Patients enrolled in these trials are given access to medicines not yet approved by the Food and Drug Administration. This has been a medical minute and you will find more information at yalecancercenter.org. You are listening to the WNPR Health Forum from Connecticut Public Radio.

Chu Welcome back to Yale Cancer Center Answers. This is Dr. Ed Chu and I am here in the studio this evening with our guest Dr. Mel Goldstein who is chief meteorologist of Channel 8 News and Weather. Dr. Mel, we were talking before the break about how you keep going and always have a very positive attitude.

Goldstein Yes.

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- Chu Clearly, it's very important as anyone deals with the diagnosis of cancer.
- Goldstein Yes. There are 3 items, stay busy, stay busy, and stay busy. That really is important to me. I could have easily retired many many years ago from what I was doing and I have cut back a lot on some of my activities because of the physical limitations that I have, but I haven't stopped and a few years ago I wrote *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Weather*, and it was a very successful book and all the proceeds that I got from the book came to Yale Cancer Center, and I am so proud that I just finished another book; it took 2-1/2 years to write.
- Chu Wow!
- Goldstein It is *Dr. Mel's Connecticut Climate Book*. It goes all the way back to the time of the pilgrims and the kind of weather that they experienced when they came upon these shores and all the kinds of weather that has happened since then. I go into the blizzard of 1988, the hurricane of 1938, all the hurricanes that we had in the 50s, the storms, the snow in the 60s and the 70s; there is some of climate changes in there and the last time there was a book written about anything of Connecticut climate was back in the early to mid 60s. So you are talking about something that hasn't been updated in decades and decades. I was very happy to be able to put this book together and it is going to be out this month. We will be doing book signings in September at R.J. Julia among other places around Connecticut and again, all the proceeds for this book are going to Yale Cancer Center, specifically for the Dr. Mel Myeloma Research Fund.
- Chu Terrific! On behalf of the Cancer Center, we want to thank you for all of the efforts, all of your support, and certainly, all of your donations to the Dr. Mel Myeloma Research Fund, because that is critically important for allowing our scientists and our clinicians to pursue the latest in the battle against multiple myeloma.
- Goldstein Yeah, it's a complicated disease. I talk to different patients all the time and people have a manifestation of this disease in different ways. Not everybody is impacted the same way. Some people are impacted through their liver and through their kidneys. I am severely impacted by my bones, and it so interesting that when I go out and talk to people they say, Dr. Mel, you look so much shorter than when you were on TV. Well, I shrunk 7 or 8 inches but I always tell them I am still at least that much above ground and I am not going anywhere. I am still going to be here, and after this book is finished and is out, I have a third book that is coming along.
- Chu What is that going to be about?

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- Goldstein It is going to be sketches of strength. It is going to be about people who have lived far longer and far better than they ever thought possible regardless of their diagnosis because of the way that we are able to survive cancer these days and the importance of survivorship. I hope to be able to have that put together within a couple of years and tie it not only to the profiles of these people, but also to medical aspects of where they can find good treatment and where the best treatment lies and why things work and others don't. It is going to be more of a medical book than a meteorological book, but it goes back to my own philosophy, Dr. Mel, you don't stop and you keep going each day. God gave you a blessing and it truly is and you live it to its fullest and don't worry about the 8-day forecast because who knows what is going to happen 8 days from now, or 80 days. So many people ask what the weather is going to be like in 3 months; if I can get the forecast right in a couple of days, I am happy, so I think short term.
- Chu As I recall, the blizzard of 1988 wasn't quite on the forecast of many of the meteorologists in the region.
- Goldstein No, no. I loved the blizzard of 1988. That was quite a storm. The whole state of Connecticut was closed down because of the huge storm that we had and the piles of snow. One of the nice things about New England is that there isn't a form of weather on the face of the earth that we fail to get. We get ice storms, we get blizzards, we get tornadoes, we get hurricanes; you name it, we get it and maybe that is what gets me up in the morning. I don't want to miss a thing.
- Chu Absolutely. Dr. Mel, you have a website that is an incredible resource for patients with multiple myeloma. Can you tell us a little bit about that?
- Goldstein It's called drmelmyeloma.com and this is a website that gives suggestions about where people can find medical care for multiple myeloma and also where they can find stories about people who have lived some very remarkable lives; I am fascinated by the stories. They are terrific because they are inspiring to us, and when we read these stories, we realize well, if it can happen for these people, it can happen for me as well, and I am going to live my life and I am going to be as happy as I possibly can and be thankful for it. It delves into some of the medical aspects as well as the survivorship aspects of living with cancer, but living with cancer in a way that is a lot better than you ever thought possible.
- Chu That is an important point to emphasize because as you say, we have come so far in the last 10 to 15 years in our understanding of how cancer rises but also, how we can treat the symptoms of cancer, and how we can treat the consequences of the various treatments that are offered.

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Goldstein Look, it's not easy. I mean, it would be naïve for me to say that the treatments that I have had have been easy. I am just getting off right now a series of high-dose steroids that I have had to take for a week, which really takes a lot of you. It takes a lot of energy, you don't sleep well, and it makes you a bit irritable. Do I sound irritable?

Chu You never sound irritable.

Goldstein And it's not an easy treatment. But I'll tell you, it works, and what do you have in return? You have your life, and what could be more precious than that? So why complain?

Chu Terrific! So, you are working on the sketches book, which hopefully will be out in a year or so. The next thing is your *Dr. Mel's Connecticut Climate Book*, which is going to be coming out this month, in August.

Goldstein And I am going to be all over the state signing this book. The book signing is everywhere. So you have got to come out and see me and we will chat.

Chu You should check certainly. I know my wife is a big fan of the R. J Julia bookstore and I think you can go on their website and find out when Dr. Mel will be there.

Goldstein Yeah, it will be in the beginning of September.

Chu You have so many different things going on, but are there any other projects that may be in the works?

Goldstein Well, I love music.

Chu Yes, that is right. You are a Jazz Aficionado as I recall.

Goldstein People like to call me that. To me, music is very important and I hope some day as I slow down in some of my things that I am doing that I have the opportunity to get a little bit better at music and start writing some tunes that are just bouncing around in my head. Music is a tremendous expression and jazz is one of those very unique to America art forms. It takes a lot of talent to do it right. I don't know if I have the talent, but I sure have the interest and of course I have my family, and a wonderful family. I have a wonderful advocate at home with Arlene who helps me navigate through all that I have to navigate through and I have a great grandson who just fills my eyes with pleasure whenever I see him come to my house. He is 6 years old right now and growing up faster right before my very eyes.

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Chu Your true moon and stars.

Goldstein That's absolutely right.

Chu Dr. Mel, in the brief time we have left can you give a parting message to our listeners out there.

Goldstein Don't give up. Don't ever give up. No is not part of your dictionary and each day is the most important day of your life and you are going to live it to the absolute fullest. Please don't worry about next week, or 2 weeks from now, or 2 years from now. I have had friends who would say things to me, they are in the car business, and they have contracts that are longer than my life expectancy, and I say, why do you worry about that? That is meaningless. What is important is to be able to look outside, breathe the air, see the sky, feel what is out there and say that this day is going to be a very productive one for me. Maybe I will write, maybe I will listen to music, maybe I will play some music, maybe I will go fishing with the grandson, maybe I will try to build something today. Life comes to us once around and you have got to be there, you cannot let go, you have got to be pretty selfish about it.

Chu Those are terrific words, not only to cancer survivors, cancer patients, but really all of us should live each and every day to the fullest.

Goldstein We take advantage and we take for granted so much of what there is when we are feeling well. When we do have a serious illness it heightens our awareness of the importance, the real importance of life and prioritizes the things that are absolutely vital to our existence.

Chu Dr. Mel, you have been an inspiration to me, and certainly to everyone in the state of Connecticut, and again, I would just like to thank you for all of your tremendous efforts on behalf of cancer research and all of your efforts and support of what is going on at Yale Cancer Center.

Goldstein And remember what I say, at the end of the day what's most important is what you do for other people.

Chu Absolutely, well Dr. Mel, again as always, it has been great having you on the show. You have been listening to Yale Cancer Center Answers, and again, I would like to thank our special guest, Dr. Mel, for joining me this evening. Until next time, I am Ed Chu from Yale Cancer Center wishing you a safe and healthy week.

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