

An excerpt from Terry McBride's "The Hell I Can't"

Karen and Kris arrived while I was having dinner, and other family members drifted in and out all evening. This was the "big surgery" we had known was coming. Everyone was positive that these great physicians had the skill to finally rid my body of the infection.

One by one, they left until it was just Karen, Kris and me. We were talking about my concerns and the staff's recent, subtle shift in attitude when the door to my room opened. Dr. Hedgewood entered, trailed by five other doctors and Liz, the head nurse. Among the group, I only recognized him, Dr. Griffin, and Liz. He greeted Karen and introduced those with him: the Chief of the General Surgery Department, the Chief of the Infectious Disease Department, and the head residents of those departments.

From my experience, good news was usually carried by one person, but bad news was brought by a committee. I felt my palms grow sweaty. It was eight o'clock at night, and here was a group of staff physicians who usually went home around five leaving interns and residents to run the hospital. I knew they had been meeting for three hours discussing the best course of action. Now I wasn't sure I wanted to hear it; the mass of humanity standing in my room was daunting.

Dr. Hedgewood began. "As I mentioned before, the x-rays were excellent and, for the first time, we know the extent of the infected area. But, it is much worse than we had imagined."

His eyes touched on everything in the room but my eyes.

"The infection is not just in your spine and the surrounding tissue. It's spread throughout your pelvic area, into your abdomen, into both buttocks, and possibly into your upper thighs. It appears to have followed the sciatic nerves down into your legs. We're also concerned that there might be a hole in your colon."

I couldn't believe what he was saying! Although his speech was peppered with medical terminology and bigger words than I understood, I got the gist of his message. Stunned, I glanced toward Liz. She was looking at Karen and Kris, a big tear running down her cheek. My temples started to pound.

"I know this is hard to grasp all at once," Dr. Hedgewood continued. "I need to impress on you how serious this is, how important it is that we take aggressive measures to eradicate the infection now before it becomes even more life-threatening."

I heard a small gasp from Karen. Everything seemed to gear down to slow motion as Dr. Hedgewood stepped over to her and put his hand on her shoulder, then gently patted Kris as she snuggled into her mother's arms. With huge eyes, Kris looked from the doctor to me, then back

to the doctor. I remember the look on her face when she got it; there was something very wrong with her daddy. When she started to whimper, my heart broke. As brave as I knew Karen would try to be, tears were welling up in her eyes as she rocked Kris.

Dr. Hedgewood continued to fuss over Kris as if to delay giving us his conclusion. It must be very hard for him, I thought, my head feeling like a stalled engine. I'd always seen him as tough and standoffish. Now I wanted to say something to support *him*. I wanted to sound confident and brave, but I felt on the edge of control, afraid if I opened my mouth, I'd lose it. I just lay there speechless, waiting for him to get to the point.

I realized Dr. Hedgewood was trying to convince me that because the infection was so extensive and now life-threatening, the procedure he was about to explain was the only option they had. It was like a mechanic telling you how broken your car is before he tells you how much it will cost to fix it. As this caring man talked, I knew it was going to cost me big to get fixed.

Finally, he approached my bed and sat down on a stool. Looking into my eyes, I saw gentleness in him I had not seen before. It scared and moved me all at the same time.

He touched my arm as he began to speak, "Tomorrow, we're going to do a very radical and extensive procedure. First, we'll insert a catheter in your back, just like they did to get the x-rays, except this time, we'll inject a blue dye that will follow the various sinus tracks and essentially color all of the infected material. We'll do this while you're under anesthesia, so there won't be any pain.

"Next, the general surgeons are going to open you from your front. Their incision will start just above your penis and move up around your navel toward your sternum. They'll open up that whole area and literally cut out all the infected tissue down to the spine. Then I will scrape and chisel off the part of your spine that's infected. When that's done, we'll turn you over and the orthopedic team will open you up from your back. We will start just above your rectum and go up to about mid-back and again open that area up so we can cut out all the infected tissue there. Then I will scrape and chisel off the infected part of the spine from the back." He took a deep breath.

I couldn't believe what he was saying. I looked at Karen, silent tears tracking down her face. He went on.

"Then a team will start from the incision in your lower back and open your left buttock and thigh to clean out the infection along your sciatic nerve. If necessary, they will open your right buttock and thigh as well. Finally, the team will go in between your scrotum and rectum to excise that area because the infection has completely engulfed your tailbone. We need to get all the dead and infected bone and tissue out of there."

A great void opened up in me. I felt as if I was spiraling down into an abyss. My God, they were going to open me up and clean me out like a dead deer. I had never imagined anything as hideous as this.

I knew that all of those doctors had come so I could ask questions, but I had none. I was too shocked, numb, devastated. I felt empty. Then a feeling came over me the likes of which I'd never known before. It permeated my mind and body. When I realized what it was, I almost lost control. I knew terror.

My body began to visibly shake. With Kris in her arm, Karen came over and took my hand. Liz came around the bed and took the other. Dr. Hedgewood got up from the stool and motioned Karen to sit. He stepped back and continued.

“Terry, the entire team knows this is very drastic. And we know how devastating this must seem to you, but we all agree that it offers the best chance, maybe the only chance of finally eliminating the infection.”

He stopped and cleared his throat. When he started speaking again, his voice was strained. “We also believe that the chances are great that you will suffer some nerve damage. Understand, we are dealing with a life-threatening infection.” He paused as if to gain some strength. “We’re fairly certain,” he continued, “that through this procedure, you will lose the use of your left leg.”

He began to explain about the sciatic nerve and how this result couldn't be avoided when I held up my hand to stop him.

Overwhelmed, I said, “If it's got to be done, let's do it.” I couldn't take any more.

He looked at me, then added, “Yes, but if it's as bad as we think it is, there is also a good chance you will lose the use of your right leg, and you will probably lose control of your bowels and bladder. And, there a great possibility you will end up sexually impotent.”

I took a deep breath. “What's that?”

One of the residents replied, “Everything will be down there,” nodding at my privates, “it just won't work.”

My temples began to scream, the roar of blood in my ears drowning out everything. Dr. Hedgewood's face became a bright pinpoint; the other doctors standing around him receded into shadows.

He leaned close to me and said, “Terry, do you understand?”

Understand? What, is he crazy? I thought. How can I wrap my mind around what he's saying? I'm twenty-four and he's telling me this operation will rob me of the use of one leg, probably both, and there is a good chance it will leave me sexually impotent and without control of my bowels and bladder.

Understand? Hell, no! I don't even want to understand. I don't want to hear that this E. coli bacteria is eating me alive. I don't want to believe that my life could be over. I want to unzip myself from this body and get out!

The room was deathly silent except for Kris's soft crying. How I held myself together I don't know. Most of these men were married with children at home who also counted on them. With years of medical training and skill, it must have been a terrible feeling to present such a nightmare solution when one had committed oneself to helping others. Yet they had all come to face me and support me, to answer questions, possibly to justify their decisions, to explain their beliefs.

I don't know what they expected of me, but I was lost. There was nothing I could do. I couldn't think, and I didn't have any questions.

After several more minutes, Dr. Hedgewood broke the awkward silence. "Your team of surgeons are the best available. We'll be as careful as possible. But," he added, "with all the scar tissue already in that area and the extent of the infection, we simply won't be able to avoid damaging major nerves."

"We really don't know what will occur," he said. "What we do know, Terry, is you cannot expect to come out of this one whole."

