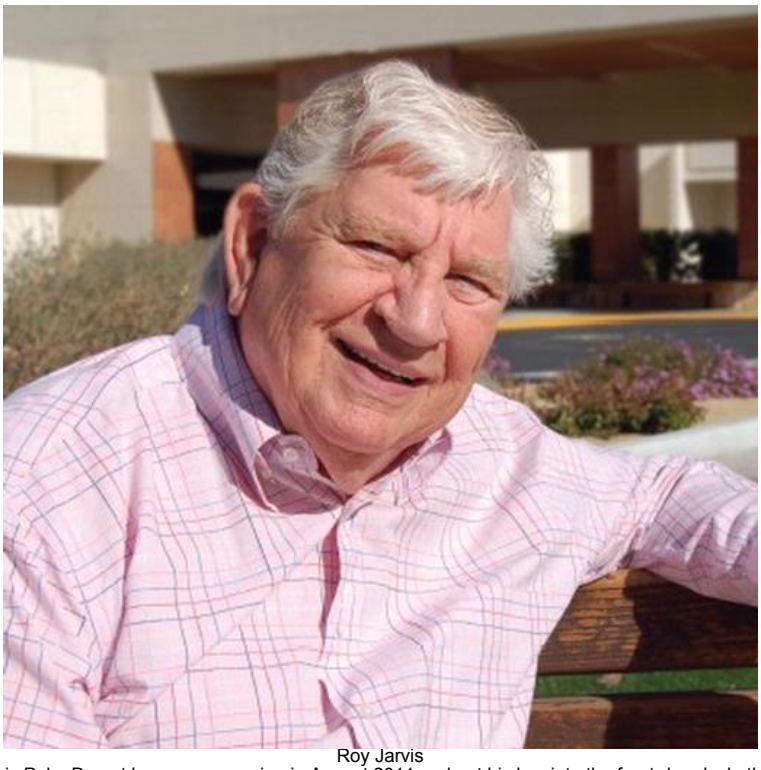
A Stroke Of Luck

ER Visit for Stroke Serendipitously Reveals Cancer



Roy Jarvis

As 80-year-old Roy Jarvis returned to his Palm Desert home one evening in August 2011 and put his key into the front-door lock, the small bag of groceries in his left hand slipped out of his grasp and dropped to the steps. Thinking he simply didn't have a good grip on the bag, he picked it up, went inside, fixed himself a light meal and sat down at his computer.

"I found I didn't have good coordination but didn't understand why," recalls Jarvis. "I retired early, still not cognizant that there was anything particularly wrong."

Early the next morning, Jarvis attended a 12-step meeting of Codependents Anonymous (CODA) and remarked to a friend that there was something wrong with the way he was feeling. Wisely, his friend suggested they head to Eisenhower Medical Center.

"I knew the route very well because I volunteer at the Betty Ford Center several times a week," Jarvis says, referring to the renowned alcohol and drug addiction treatment facility on the Eisenhower campus. "So instead of turning right to the Betty Ford Center, we proceeded straight ahead to the Eisenhower Emergency Department."

"There was a gentleman there in scrubs who said to me, 'Hi, what's going on?'" Jarvis relates. "I told him I thought maybe I'd had a stroke because, while I didn't have too much of a problem communicating, my left arm and leg weren't functioning right."

Jarvis was brought into an exam room for some initial tests, and then transported to diagnostic imaging for an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scan to take a look at what was happening inside his body.

"By this time, I was nervous and trembling," he admits. "The doctors and nurses were very soothing, talking to me the entire time, and they gave me an injection to calm me down since I'm claustrophobic."

After his scan, Jarvis was admitted to the hospital. There, the doctors told him that he had, indeed, had a stroke. The MRI had also revealed something suspicious in his spine, and some additional diagnostic imaging was necessary.

"I said I didn't really want to have another MRI because of my claustrophobia," Jarvis continues. "But they explained that it was really important, and that they'd do everything possible to make me comfortable. There was an element of trust, and I felt as if I was in the right place with the right people."

The additional testing confirmed that Jarvis had cancer in his spine.

"I've had prostate cancer for five years," he explains. "I'd had radiation therapy when I was first diagnosed, and had monthly injections to regulate certain hormones in the body. But I was totally unaware that the cancer had left the prostate area and spread to my spine. It was hard news to digest and it made me sad, questioning my future.

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—Roy Jarvis

"But I'm a firm believer that what happens is what is meant to be," he continues. "I was grateful that I ended up in the emergency room at Eisenhower, and that the doctors and technologists discovered what was going on in my body. If I hadn't had this stroke, who knows when it would have been discovered that the cancer had spread? It really was a stroke of luck," he smiles.

Jarvis underwent physical and occupational therapy to help him regain use of his left arm and leg, the after-effects of his stroke.

"By the time I had gotten to Eisenhower, the time frame for giving me clot-busting drugs had passed, so this type of physical rehab was the treatment," he says. When stroke symptoms occur as the result of a clot that blocks blood flow to the brain — as in Roy's case — there is only about a four and a half-hour window during which a drug called tPA (tissue plasminogen activator) can be administered to help dissolve the clot, underscoring the importance of seeking prompt medical attention if you think you are having a stroke.

Jarvis also is undergoing treatment for the prostate cancer that spread to his spine.

"I'm back on monthly injections, and I also receive an intravenous bone-building medication to help strengthen my spine," he says. "The oncologist checks my blood every 30 days to monitor my PSA (prostate-specific antigen, a hormone produced by the prostate gland) and testosterone levels, and there's the possibility of some additional radiation treatments."

"My stroke brought me the opportunity to treat my cancer," Jarvis continues. "We can't cure or eradicate it, but I can get on the right path to manage it."

His health challenges haven't slowed him down. A native Canadian, Jarvis and a companion — also originally from Canada — are planning a summer road trip to western Canada, starting in Victoria and back down to the U.S. through Vancouver. Last summer, they drove across the United States and explored their respective families' roots in eastern Canada.

He also remains active in the local CODA group, and is serving as chairman of a southern California CODA conference slated for this June.

“I live an active life,” he says, with masterful understatement. Before retiring, Jarvis was the advertising manager at a California daily newspaper for 30 years, and then served for a decade as the executive director of a volunteer organization involved in grand prix racing in Long Beach.

“It was good preparation for my volunteer work now, getting things done,” he says.

“I continue to be grateful for Eisenhower Medical Center,” he adds. “I’ve come to understand and appreciate all the things they do and the services they have. There’s a heartbeat, a pulse, a caring feeling about the place. I was in good hands.”

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