# Road to a Cure

The founder of the Caring Ambassadors Hepatitis C Program looks back on his journey with the virus, from the day he was diagnosed to the day he was cured.

September 30, 2011 By Cristina Gonzalez

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Randy Dietrich's jaw dropped. Eyes frantically running over the words on the computer screen, Dietrich read "liver failure," "cancer," "death sentence." What was happening to him?

This was in 1999, after routine blood tests showed that Dietrich had elevated liver enzymes. His doctor mentioned the possibility of hepatitis C and suggested he lay off alcohol while waiting for further test results. But Dietrich was 42. He was healthy and energetic and about to be named the president of his company. Turning to search engines to get some quick info, Dietrich was unprepared for what he found. And frightened.

After confirmation he had chronic hepatitis C, Dietrich "lay in bed and cried," he remembers. "Then I got up and thought, 'Did you think your life was always going to be easy?'"

After doing some clear-eyed research on the disease, Dietrich, who lives in Denver, disclosed to his family and his colleagues. He was unsure exactly when he acquired HCV, but a plasma donation during his college years, involving hep C-contaminated blood collection equipment, was the likely culprit.

After meeting with his CEO at Republic Financial Corporation, Dietrich and his colleagues reached two decisions: First, his promotion would be postponed while he was on sabbatical, and second, they would assemble a team of experts to come up with a smart and creative treatment approach.

The four and a half months Dietrich was on sabbatical turned into the beginning of the Caring Ambassadors Hepatitis C Program, a national nonprofit organization focused on education and awareness. With the support of his company, Dietrich was able to gather experts, hear their theories and cull together information to design a treatment approach consistent with his own goals, namely to have good health as long as possible. Taking into account his labs and the fact that there was only a slight chance he'd be able to cure his hep C with the drugs available at the time, Dietrich initially decided to do an all-natural course of therapy.

"I started doing everything you've heard of but never wanted to do," Dietrich said of his regimen, which included cutting all alcohol, red meat and fried foods out of his diet.  His plan involved

eating a balanced diet, exercising daily and maintaining a busy schedule of holistic appointments: acupuncture, energy healing, massage and chiropractics. During this time, Dietrich remained in constant contact with doctors and carefully went over regular blood work.

In 2006, after eight years on his holistic regimen, Dietrich changed course. He felt he had gotten as physically and mentally prepared as possible and that he was ready to sustain treatment and weather its sometimes significant side effects.

Dietrich received a combination pegylated interferon plus ribavirin treatment for 42 weeks, from September 2006 to June 2007—a process that involved weekly injections and twice-daily pills. Doctors were hoping for a 100-fold drop in viral load—the amount of hep C virus (HCV) in his blood—after four weeks and an undetectable viral load level after 12 weeks. Dietrich experienced what is considered "a rapid viral response"—he was undetectable at six weeks—a clear sign that treatment was working. Slightly after the nine-month mark, Dietrich was able to stop treatment. A follow-up test six months later confirmed that he was cured.

"It was awesome!" Dietrich recalls. "My viral load dropped so much so early that I knew if I stayed on the protocol, the odds were in my favor."

Four years later, Dietrich continues to do well—and the hep C experience continues to influence his life. He still maintains most of his health regimen, and he has a newfound passion for health and advocacy, channeled through the Caring Ambassadors Hepatitis C Program, now run by his sister, Lorren Sandt. And while weary of giving advice, Dietrich is open about his experiences and is generous with the information he has.

First, he urges everyone to get tested. He never considered himself in a high-risk group and he had no symptoms, yet a simple blood test changed his life.

"I'm a big believer that the No. 1 treatment is diagnosis," Dietrich said. "Once you've been tested and you know your status, you can stop doing the things that hurt you."

Next, disclose—to anyone who can help with the journey ahead.

"Disclosure affects how you go about treatment and how you make choices," Dietrich said.

Although deciding whether to go on treatment is a truly personal decision, Dietrich does have some thoughts: Understand the virus and its effect on your body, establish a process of finding relevant and unbiased information, and get as healthy as possible, as soon as possible. And use your intuition, he adds. Listen to doctors, your team of experts, but expand your spiritual practice and heed your body's messages. Finally, find support.

In addition to hepmag.com, a good place to start getting information and linking to support is Dietrich's nonprofit, the Caring Ambassadors Hepatitis C Program. The organization's goals are to educate people living with HCV, promote HCV awareness and facilitate collaboration among HCV

groups.

These days, Dietrich has established a new normal for his life, including routines such as heading to the office and hitting the basketball court. Just like he did when he attacked his hep C virus, Dietrich is using determination, control and persistence to pursue a full, rich and healthy life.

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