A Slow and Sneaky Onset

It was the constant ache in my head that lead to the discovery of my pituitary tumor. After several doctors' appointments, blood tests, eye appointments and an MRI, I was finally referred to the pituitary clinic in Halifax. On March 26, 2008 my mom, boyfriend, and I went to Halifax to meet both the endocrinologist and neurosurgeon

I had plenty of time to mentally prepare for this appointment, and despite how ready I felt, I wasn't. I recall my jaw trembling with fear as I was sitting and waiting to meet the doctors and nurses. Once they arrived, I immediately felt overwhelmed and bombarded with information. I kept thinking to myself "I know you see a lot of people with tumors, but this is my first brain tumor, please be kind". The entire appointment was a blur; luckily for me both my mom and boyfriend were taking notes while I tried my hardest to fight back the tears.

The endocrinologist began asking me questions regarding my feet and hand size, and whether my facial features had changed over the last number of years. I hadn't noticed any drastic changes in my features, but once the doctor compared photos of me taken 5 years ago, he was certain my tumor was producing growth hormone.

At the time I really wasn't sure what this meant, my mind seemed to be fixed on the reality that I was 23 years old, and having brain surgery. I was uncertain as to when my surgery would take place. What I did know, was that I would be coming back to the hospital the following morning to have a blood test done in order to confirm the endocrinologist's suspicions about my tumor producing growth hormone. I didn't sleep a wink that night. It was a combination of coming to terms with the information I had just received, and the ever-present ache in my head that kept me awake. We arrived at the hospital the next morning to have the blood test. The test took a couple of hours and I was asked to drink a liquid that tasted very similar to flat orange pop. Once the test was finished, my mom, boyfriend, and I went home to play the very unpopular waiting game.

I was called within two days with the blood results. The endocrinologist was right. My tumor was producing the growth hormone. This meant I had acromegaly. Ok, so I have this, but what does it mean? I had a million questions for the nurse on the other end of the line, she answered them all and said she would send me an information package.

While I waited for the information package to arrive, I read almost everything on the internet about acromegaly. In hindsight, this probably was not the greatest idea. I know now that acromegaly is a hormonal disorder that results from too much growth hormone in the body causing skeletal overgrowth deformities, particularly of the hands, feet, and face. The excess was coming from my brain tumor. Acromegaly is treatable, but because of its slow and sneaky onset, it often is not diagnosed early or correctly. I was lucky. I had been diagnosed and hoping to have surgery in order to fix this disorder.

It has been a little over a year since my surgery, and I am happy to say that my growth hormone levels are within the normal range. Although this experience proved to be very difficult, and emotionally demanding, I have learned that when things happen (good or bad) the reason for it happening is to learn something. I have learned that good friends and family are worth their weight in gold, and that life is full of unexpected gifts.

Clinical Pearls

- After an overnight fast, a baseline blood test is done. You are then given an orange flavored sugar drink and your growth hormone level is checked every 30 minutes for two hours.

- Growth hormone levels will remain high, if you have acromegaly. Your growth hormone level will go down if you do not.

- This is called an oral glucose tolerance test.