

She's relying on rare radiation to shrink tumor

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Device caused 'excruciating' pain.

Sally Lambertus has seen her share of medical clinics and hospital rooms.

The 55-year-old Gothenburg resident has weathered 10 major surgeries—including a stomach staple—and has suffered from kidney stones, diabetes, asthma, thyroid problems, osteoporosis and a compromised immune system most of her life.

In the past two years, she's battled flu, pneumonia and low potassium which required hospitalizations.

Yet the worst pain Lambertus has ever felt in her life was eight grueling hours at the University of Nebraska Medical Center on July 1.

That was the day four bolts were screwed into her head that held a halo device made of titanium steel which rested on her shoulders.

"I looked like I had a muzzle on so I wouldn't bite people," Lambertus said, referring to Hannibal Lecter—a character played by Anthony Hopkins in "Silence of the Lambs."

The device locked her head to a table so she wouldn't move for an hour of stereotactic radiation—a procedure not yet done in many medical centers, she said.

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"It was bad pressure like my head was in a vise," Lambertus said.

The radiation was necessary to treat a rare benign tumor growing in her inner ear.

"It was pushing into my brain," she said.

Without treatment, Lambertus said doctors told her the tumor would continue to grow, eventually taking away her hearing and finally becoming life threatening.

She could have opted for 30 separate and smaller doses of stereotactic radiation or surgical removal of the tumor.

"Surgery would have meant complete loss of hearing in that area," Lambertus explained. "My doctor and three specialists in Omaha decided that given my other health problems, one high-dose would probably be the best."

Lambertus said she also didn't want to stay in Omaha for the smaller doses of radiation.



For two years, doctors didn't know what was causing her dizziness, headaches, ringing in her ears and her right ear turning bright red.

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"The doctors thought it was an allergy at first but did a hearing test and found out I had significant hearing loss in my right ear," Lambertus said, noting that she saw several specialists and had numerous tests.

Her memory started to fail, her vision got worse and she fell in June of 2008 and broke her right ankle.

Finally, in the spring of 2009, she underwent a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan where doctors spotted a tumor they later diagnosed as acoustic neuroma.

According to the Acoustic Neuroma Association, the condition is a non-cancerous tumor that grows on the eighth cranial nerve leading from the brain to the inner ear.

Most acoustic neuromas, that occur in close to two persons per 100,000, are diagnosed in patients between the ages of 30 and 60. More women than men are affected.

Following the radiation, Lambertus said she experienced violent nausea and spent a week in a hospital room receiving intravenous fluids and shots to stop her nausea.

"But I'd do it again (stereotactic radiation) to get the tumor stopped," she said. "My hearing won't get any better but I don't want it to get worse."

Lambertus said she won't know until the first of the year and another MRI if the tumor is shrinking.

"It will always be there unless it's surgically removed," she said. "The doctors will have to keep an eye on it with follow-up MRIs."

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Since the surgery, Lambertus said her balance is better but she often feels fatigued.

“I try to remain positive that they stunted it even though some days I don't feel good,” she said. “I still try to get up and get things done.”

Because of health problems, Lambertus retired from the former Monroe Automotive plant

in 2000 after working there for 27 years.

To keep her mind off her physical ailments, Lambertus reads and listens to music.

She also tries to do something nice for someone each day.

“Even if it's sending a card or a phone call,” Lambertus said.

Lambertus said she wanted to tell her story so that people who don't feel well search for an answer to their symptoms.

“Sometimes you have to look or dig deeper or get referred to a specialist and make sure the doctors do other testing,” she said.

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