



## COMMONSENSE ONCOLOGY

by Sandy Kelly Bexon

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My parents are perfect examples of the consequences of different approaches to end of life. Commonsense Oncology wasn't a thing when my father died nearly 40 years ago, and up until recently people had to sleuth out this type of approach for themselves when they knew it would be the best path forward. The commonsense part involves pursuing treatments only if they meaningfully extend lifespan without jeopardizing quality of life.

They found my dad's brain tumour when he was only 57 years old. He was like our North Star and this shook us to our core, as it does with all families. He had recently retired, had watched all four of us kids grow up and get married, and was waiting for all the grandkids to arrive and complete the perfect family picture. But that picture was shattered. He underwent major brain surgery, months of painful chemotherapy and radiation, partial paralysis, and life in a stark hospital room for his last year and a half instead. Much as we all visited everyday, he died alone in that impersonal hospital room like a soldier alone on the battlefield.

When Mom was diagnosed 12 years later with breast cancer, she underwent a mastectomy and the initial chemo treatments. But when it soon became apparent that it had spread to her bones, she sat us down and said, 'You kids have to know I'm not going to do what Dad did.' We understood immediately and from that moment followed her lead on her own journey, which quickly took us all to hospice care.

I say all of us because hospice care enveloped us all. It was an excruciating time and we cried buckets of tears each day. But we cried them together. This experience was real and there were no lab-coated doctors dangling carrots of hope in front of her. Don't get me wrong - I believe the medical professionals were doing their best in both situations, with what they knew at the time and had at their disposal. But if they had calmed down enough to frankly discuss the outlook and personal cost of each treatment with Dad all those years before, he may have enjoyed the last months of his life instead of suffering all the treatments they advised.

He was young and he was scared. He wanted to live and jumped with a compulsion at everything they offered. But in the end, he was plucked from us in a way that left a gaping wound in our family that never really healed. Meanwhile, Mom quietly reflected on each moment of life with grace and was greeted with compassion from all sides. In a hospice room, it's as though a thousand miracles unfold for all the days that are left. Terribly sad as we were, her death felt like a triumph of the spirit. She was lifted gently from our embrace, with all four of us kids at her side.

Death can be a beautiful thing. No matter the diverse paths Mom and Dad took, they both believed in heaven. That still gives us comfort all these years later.

