A Grateful Patient Story: Battling Medullary Thyroid Cancer

Thyroid cancer is one of the fastest growing cancers diagnosed in the United States with the number of new cases doubling over the last 30 years. Much of this increase can be attributed to advanced detection, as the disease is often picked up during imaging for another medical issue or a routine exam.

The thyroid is a butterfly-shaped gland located in the front, lower portion of the neck. It secretes thyroid hormones, which regulate important bodily functions like the heart rate and metabolism. Nearly 3 out of every 4 cases are found in women. Most patients do not experience symptoms, but those who do may feel a painless lump or swelling.

Last year, Raquelina Luna’s life changed in a flash when she was diagnosed with medullary thyroid cancer (MTC), a rare and aggressive type of thyroid cancer that frequently spreads to the lymph nodes and other organs. MTC is hereditary in up to 25 percent of cases.

MTC can be difficult to diagnose. Ms. Luna’s cancerous nodule had remained dormant for nearly 30 years. “Everything seemed normal, but Manju Harshan, MD, Assistant Professor of Pathology, went further with the biopsy—by listening carefully she was able to reach a correct diagnosis,” explains Ms. Luna.

The Center for Thyroid and Parathyroid Diseases at Mount Sinai is dedicated to providing comprehensive care for patients with any type of disease or any stage of thyroid cancer. “Like anyone who gets this kind of diagnosis, I was deeply affected. However, I began to prepare myself for the next step: surgery,” says Ms. Luna.

“Thyroid cancer is a very treatable form of cancer, particularly when it is caught early,” says Raymond Chai, MD, Director of Head and Neck Robotic Surgery at Mount Sinai Union Square. “Surgical removal of the thyroid—a procedure called a thyroidectomy—as well as any affected lymph nodes is typically the first step. Only small cancers can be treated by removing a part of the thyroid.”

“Looking back, I can only begin to express the sense of gratitude I feel to Dr. Chai and his surgical team. Mohan R. Obilisundar, MD, was the anesthesiologist whose calm presence and gaze gave me confidence and a sense of tranquility. Santa Monción, an office assistant, facilitated each step of my journey,” says Ms. Luna.

Patients who undergo a total thyroidectomy need to take thyroid hormone replacement medication that mimics normal thyroid function for the rest of their life. Radioactive iodine is a treatment that is often used to destroy any remaining thyroid cells.

Ms. Luna’s surgery was a success and her care was transferred seamlessly to endocrinologist Maria Brito Ferreiras, MD. Dr. Ferreiras continues to monitor Ms. Luna’s medications and safeguard her health.

“In addition to the professionalism, experience, and expertise, I want to emphasize the real sense of human caring I received from everyone at Mount Sinai Union Square,” says Ms. Luna who is now cancer-free. “From my admission to my discharge, the entire staff was warm, present, and focused on service. Each of them made a difference in the midst of a difficult ordeal.”

Mount Sinai is a National Cancer Institute-Designated Cancer Center and is ranked by U.S. News & World Report in its 2017-2018 “Best Hospitals” guidebook as one of the nation’s top cancer programs.