

# Thyroid Cancer Canada's Mini-Bios 2010

*This file contains "Mini-Bios" - or personal stories of TCC-Thry'vors members who are willing to share their personal experiences with thyroid cancer in order to help others in similar situations. There are different types and variants of thyroid cancer, and different treatment protocols but many common experiences.*

*The following "Mini-Bios" are patient experiences, and should not be considered as medical advice.*

Bios were collected between 2003 and 2010.

If you would like to share your thyroid cancer experiences, please send your mini-bio, following the same format in this file, to [info@thyroidcancercanada.org](mailto:info@thyroidcancercanada.org).



**(submitted 2005, updated 2010)**

**Name or Yahoo ID:** barbmarie\_98

**Email Address:** barbmarie@gmail.com

**Province/City:** Windsor, ON

**Type of Thyroid Cancer:**

Papillary

**When Diagnosed:**

48 years old

**Life situation/experience that others may find commonality with:**

Nothing comes to mind except that I did have many chest x-rays as a child because of pneumonia, bronchitis and asthma.

**My Treatment Experiences:**

I was diagnosed with Hypocalcemia, hypoparathyroidism and hypothyroidism.

**Symptoms & tests that led up to the diagnosis:**

I really did not have any symptoms. I had gained about 40 pounds in 4 years but I thought it was because I had started to work midnights and just attributed it to poor eating habits because of work. Then I had a kidney stone -- my third one. My doctor thought that it was too many so he decided to do blood work on my calcium levels. Well they came back way to high. So I was sent to London to a surgeon who did a number of tests to figure out what Para-thyroid gland was infected. It turned out to be only one. He removed the infected parathyroid

gland, and then he saw a nodule, did a biopsy, came back positive for cancer. So a week later I went back in and had my entire thyroid removed.

**Surgery, hospital stay & recovery:**

I had surgery to remove infected parathyroid (October 2001). It turned out to be only one -- now the other three are working properly. It took 2 ½ years for them to register when blood work was done, now they are working properly. Two weeks after the first surgery, I went back in for removal of the thyroid (October 2001). Stayed in the hospital for 48 hours then went home.

**Going hypo & RAI:**

Then in December 2001 I went back in the hospital for radioactive iodine, my hospital stay was 29 hours. In June 2002 I went to London to Dr. Drieger and had Thyrogen shots (Monday and Tuesday), then a dose of RAI (liquid) (on Wednesday), followed by full body scan and blood work (on Friday) all the same week. I was hypo for two weeks before and the week of treatment. Given a treatment dose and all was well. In July 2005 I went hypo again for two weeks and had Thyrogen shots and a RAI dose at a hospital in Windsor. RAI in Windsor is a capsule not liquid as in London.

**Post-treatment recovery & finding appropriate level of thyroid hormone replacement and TSH:**

I was off work for 4 months as I also had to recover from a kidney stone removal as well and they had to do that twice. After all of this I was put on Synthroid, it did not take very long to get a proper dose, maybe about six months or so.

**How I am monitored for recurrence:**

The endocrinologist sends me for blood work a month before a visit. I do that once a year. For awhile after I first came back my family doctor keep an eye on my levels on a regular basis, now I just wait for the specialist.

**Challenges I experienced with my diagnosis, treatment and recovery and how I overcame them:**

I think I was very blessed by my experiences. The first and second time around all my treatments and appointments were in London. The doctors coordinated my appointments on the same day and made everything very easy which was great because as you can imagine I was in shock through all this. It happened way too fast. The hardest part was being cold. I was so cold all the time and that was not normal for me. I had friends who had a hot tub and I went and used it as often as I could. It really helped me feel better

**Number of years since your thyroid cancer diagnosis:**

Diagnosed October of 2001.

**How I am feeling today:**

I feel pretty good today. My calcium levels are back to normal. I feel like my old energy levels are back.



**(submitted 2003/updated January 2010)**

**Name:** Kim McNally

**Province/City:** Kingston, Ontario

**When Diagnosed:**

First diagnosed in 1981 at age 15 with mixed pap/fol, no RAI treatment following. Treated at Kingston General Hospital  
Spread to lungs in 1995, have had 3 RAI's since.  
Tried Thyrogen a number of years ago but it did not raise my TSH enough to test my Tg properly. I have always had detectable Tg.

Had my daughter Grace in 1997, following two treatments.

**How I am feeling today:**

Biggest challenge is with my lungs. I get bronchitis a couple of times a year.

**My biggest Helpful Hint** - when I had RAI treatment I would suck on lemon candies or even lemons - anything to keep the glands moving as I ended up with blocked and painful parotid glands. The ENT Doctor told me they were damaged by the RAI - which I ingested in liquid form. I also wore old clothes in hospital that could be thrown away.

**(Editor's Note:** Ask your doctor for specific advice on how to protect your salivary glands during radioactive iodine treatment.)



(submitted 2005, edited 2010)

**Name or Yahoo ID:** Jennifer Prober

**Province/City:** Stratford, Ontario

**Type of Thyroid Cancer:** Papillary thyca Follicular Variant

**When Diagnosed:** age 51

**Life situation/experience that others may find commonality with:**

The year 2000 I was diagnosed and treated for uterine cancer -- Radical hysterectomy at Princess Margaret Hospital. I had early stage cancer and have reached my five year mark Cancer free!!

**My Treatment Experiences:**

The year 2003 I found a lump in my neck. After many tests and two surgeries, papillary and follicular variant thyca was found. Thankfully it was in the early stage and after receiving RAI I have been clear and maintaining a healthy TSH with an elevated dose of Synthroid 125 mcg. I might add that this diagnosis sent me for a loop. It was during the SARS outbreak in Toronto. The support and love from my family helped me fight my second battle with cancer successfully. It took a lot of persuading for my GP to get my thyroid scanned. He was in denial. Finally after three visits and me choking on food, he relented and made the appropriate tests available to me. His phone call was daunting; here we go again and please be aggressive with your treatment. My tumor was 1.5 cm and the FNB returned benign. I was choking on food so my surgeon Dr. Lorne Rotstein scheduled surgery. When the pathology report returned "Cancer" it was a blow but I was determined to fight with all my might and thus I am cancer free today.

**Challenges did you experienced with your diagnosis, treatment and recovery and how you overcame them:**

It took a good two years of manipulating my hormone level for me to feel somewhat balanced. Hypo to hyper to hypo to kind of a balance. I found the weight gain uncomfortable. I am a small frame so the extra ten pounds is very noticeable... I am happy to be alive and finally threw out my size 6 clothes...I can sleep at night with this level of hormone!! I exercise and eat healthy and count my blessings each and everyday. Thyrvors has been a blessing to me. I found friends with similar symptoms etc. and we hold each other through all our challenges and rejoice in our victories.

LIFE IS GREAT. It has been 7 years since my thyca diagnosis. I am lucky to grow old...I am 57 years young.



**(submitted 2005, undated 2010)**

**Name or Yahoo ID:** Suzanne Paquet-Vandal **Email Address:** spvandal58@hotmail.com  
**Province/City:** Sturgeon Falls, Ontario

**Type of Thyroid Cancer:** papillary cancer

**When Diagnosed:** diagnosed in 2003  
44 years old

**Symptoms & tests that led up to the diagnosis:** detected lump in throat was put off by family doctor took many visits to have this lump checked out -- no symptoms

**Surgery, hospital stay & recovery:** surgery in Sept 03

**Going hypo & RAI:** in Dec. 03 had RAI in Ottawa - took Thyrogen for RAI

**How I am monitored for recurrence:**

- body scan in June 04, everything was clean
- body scan in Oct 07, everything was good
- I see my endo once a year following blood work and a neck ultrasound.

**Challenges I experienced with my diagnosis, treatment and recovery and how I overcame them:**

The greatest challenge was the lack of support in the first year when I needed it the most. Although my family means well, it wasn't until I found the American listserv that I got answers to lingering questions and found out I wasn't alone. That's why it was my pleasure to provide help to others via Thy'vors. I wish I would have known about this group after diagnosis...since I had a "good cancer" no one really cared about my emotional state. This was the hardest thing I had to go through and a lot of the medical professionals brushed my emotional state under the carpet telling me to basically get over it and get back with living. I was pushed back to work 6 months after surgery and I was not mentally ready, or physically ready to go back.

**Number of years since your thyroid cancer diagnosis:**

6 years

**How I am feeling today (2010):**

I have a new family doctor and the first thing he did is checked my TSH level and it was off the charts and so he has changed my meds from .175 to .150 and I'm doing much better. I have lost weight and gained my memory back!!



**Name or Yahoo ID:** [jkiegerl](#) aka "Jean in BC"

(submitted 2005, updated 2010)

**Email Address:** [jkiegerl@telus.net](mailto:jkiegerl@telus.net)

**Province/City:** Merritt, BC

**Type of Thyroid Cancer:** Papillary

**When Diagnosed:** 40s-50s

**Life situation/experience that others may find commonality with:**

After 50 years of perfectly normal health, I was diagnosed with two cancers within 3 months. Thyroid cancer was discovered during the follow-up tests for melanoma mets. Menopause symptoms complicated everything.

**Treatment Experiences:**

I had the standard papillary cancer protocol: total thyroidectomy, I-123 and I-131 scans, RAI at 150 mbq, follow-up scans after and again at 1 year post-RAI. I only found that stressful because I didn't know there was a "standard protocol." I only knew thyroid cancer was rare, so I thought they were actually deciding on my treatment one step at a time. Naïve? Yes, but I had never had a serious ongoing medical problem before. I just thought I was going to die and it was only a matter of how soon. It took over a year for me to realize that neither of these cancers would kill me right away and probably neither would ever be a problem again. That is what those survival statistics mean - 98% of pap thyrcas and 65% of Stage 2 melanoma patients survive.

**Symptoms & tests that led up to the diagnosis:**

I had no recognizable thyca symptoms before diagnosis. After the TT, two symptoms immediately disappeared and that was the only signal that they were related: a chronic and constant throat-clearing cough that for 15 years I thought was an allergy and a middle-of-the-night choke like a knife in the throat that happened a couple times a year. My thyca nodule probably sat right on a nerve and when it was removed, these symptoms stopped - a definite improvement in my quality of life.

The thyroid cancer was discovered when I went for a PET scan to follow up the melanoma diagnosis. It was confirmed by an ultrasound-guided fine needle biopsy. The nodule was only 1.6 cm and was otherwise undetectable.

**Surgery, hospital stay & recovery:**

Actually, the surgery and recovery was the easiest part of thyca. I was back working out in the gym a week after surgery and downhill skiing two weeks after. Obviously, hypo-ness had not yet kicked in.

However, my experiences with the surgery led me to create a cheat-sheet for fellow Thyrcans on how to make that event less unpleasant. Those are the things I wish I had known beforehand, not just the things I actually did. The doctors and nurses were wonderful but there was no easy way to get information on what to expect. I think they didn't expect me to prepare for it - they just did their own preparation and knew I would survive it. I was not sure about that.

**Going hypo & RAI:**

Hypo was like three months of extreme jetlag. Since then, jetlag just seems like a few days of hypo - really nothing. I felt like my IQ had dropped to about 70 and

my daily functioning confirmed that - memory, reasoning, reading ability, etc. Driving and cooking were dangerous activities. Being hypo complicated menopause and other health issues because my slowed metabolism changed the uptake of medications.

I had RAI in the dirty old isolation room at Vancouver General. It was a dismal experience and did not have to be. For that I blame an insensitive system plagued with inadequate resources. I hope the isolation room in the new building has a shower, heat, clean floors and blankets without holes.

### **Post-treatment recovery & finding appropriate level of thyroid hormone replacement and TSH:**

Because of the dual-cancer stress, I stopped watching TV news, reading newspapers or any other activity that added stress to my mind. Menopause symptoms complicated everything. An inner ear problem gave me vertigo for 7 months beginning before the TT and through the whole first hypo time. It was hard for my family doctor to know what any symptom was from, but he was calm and confident that this would all eventually pass. I was too stressed and hypo to understand this at the time, but he was right.

The levo-thyroxine dosage was right the first time and has not changed except for a brief period that I was hyper-thyroid, which is just as unpleasant in its own way as hypothyroid. A temporary change in medication strength corrected this - then I went back to the original dosage again when my metabolism settled down to normal.

### **How I am monitored for recurrence:**

I had quarterly blood tests for my doctor and semi-annual physical check-ups at the cancer clinic for 2 years. Then I had only annual general checkups with my doctor and once a year with an oncologist. Now I am just checked by my doctor annually. I have no current health issues that would cause concern about recurrence for either cancer, so this is just standard protocol for follow-up.

### **Challenges I experienced with my diagnosis, treatment and recovery and how I overcame them:**

#### **Challenges:**

Panic attacks, stress, depression, menopause, and vertigo (inner ear problem), feeling betrayed by my body (not immortal?), losing some friends but finding others

#### **What helped?**

- Lots of rest, with sleeping pills when necessary.
- TLC from my family and friends
- I used exercise and Ativan to control panic attacks for the first 6 months after diagnosis. Exercise worked better than drugs if I could get to the gym as soon as I recognized the symptoms.

- Time off work - I was off work for 9 months after the thyca diagnosis to deal with all the medical appointments and treatments for the two cancers, then off for 3 months for the follow-up scans a year later.
- Thank God (and my union) for the excellent sick leave and extended health benefits plans so finances were not an additional stress.
- Counselling - The cancer clinic provided excellent counsellors. I also saw their clinical psychologist a couple times - she was very reassuring because I was not suicidal or homicidal. She pointed out all the ways I was already helping myself to get better and encouraged me to build on those effectively. Just being told that my reactions to this stress were perfectly normal was helpful - "situational depression" is a logical reaction to severe stress and it goes away when the situation improves. What a lovely concept!
- Work support - My union has a Rehabilitation program for people who are on long-term medical leave but expect to be able to return sometime. They assigned a counsellor who helped me with all the medical paperwork, financial arrangements, sick leave forms, etc. and monitored how I was doing emotionally. She arranged weekly massage therapy to help with the stress and back problems after TT surgery. She would have arranged a gradual return to work if that had been necessary also.
- Excellent books: "Thyroid Cancer" by Sara Rosenthal (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) and "The Secret Strength of Depression" (3rd edition) by Frederic Flach. The first gave me the information I needed about thyca, the second gave me the priceless line: "...the only healthy reaction to many life situations is depression."
- Anti-depressants - My doctor pointed out that telling people I was fine was not the same as actually being fine. He also said that long periods of severe stress may lead to chemical changes in the brain that make depression difficult to reverse. When I finally realized he was right, I took the drug as prescribed for about 6 months. Along with other tactics (back to work, exercise, friends, etc.) this helped and I had no problem gradually reducing my dosage to zero over a period of 3 more months.
- Yoga - I started taking yoga lessons as preparation for my second hypo period as I did not have the energy to keep up with my gym exercise. Also, I needed something positive to come out of this negative time and this worked - it was something I had always wanted to try but never found the time before.
- Art - I used drawing and watercolor painting to bring my brain back to life after being hypo. My doctors were interested in the extreme change in the paintings I did while hypo compared to my usual standard - I think they had not really grasped the mental changes that hypo causes and this was literally a graphic demonstration of the effects.
- Levo-thyroxine - it really does bring us back to normal when the dosage is correct. Weight changes, activity levels, menopause hormones and eating habits (no calcium for 5 hours) need to be taken into account in finding the right levels.

**Number of years since your thyroid cancer diagnosis:**

Since Nov. 30, 2002

**How I am feeling today:**

As of Dec 2005: “Absolutely fantastic” and you can quote me on that. I appreciate life and health more than I did before all of this happened and I take better care of myself. I also value my family and friends more and let them know that. Knowing now that I am not immortal, I have decided to take early retirement at the first opportunity (May 1, 2006 when I am 55) and join my husband in all the things that we wanted to do “sometime.” However, I did pay for a follow-up PET scan before applying for retirement, to avoid any nasty surprises after giving up the better medical insurance available at work. It was clean, so we are off to see the world starting in June.

As of Feb 2010: Life has returned to normal now, though with the added benefits that retirement provides. Once one is used to good health again and the worries have faded, there are still moments of feeling blessed to be alive, and that joy is wonderful. However, most of the time one’s personality, circumstances and issues are back to one’s historical normal – whatever the good and bad of that may have been. In my case, mostly happy and mostly comfortable. Gaining weight and greying hair – I should appreciate being able to worry about these, but they still annoy me. See – I really am back to normal!