

Would you hire a handyman to stop termites?

GUEST COLUMN

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Having cancer is like having an infestation of termites. They come in uninvited, take over, and devour all that they can. So if termites were gradually eating away at your home, crumbling the foundations, crawling through your pipes, eating away at the surface, who would you call? Joe Handyman? No you'd call a professional, someone who specializes in the diagnosis, treatment and removal of pest damage. Having cancer is no different.

Problem is you're now stepping into a totally unknown world. In the same way that there are many different professionals to take care of your home, there are multitudes of doctors and surgeons who can take care of your cancer. Most people would immediately think, "I need an oncologist" and, yes, they should always be your first stop. But for many a specialist is what they really need.

For example, if your PCP said your knee needing replacing, would you expect him or her to do it? In the same way, there are hundreds of cancer specialists, most likely many of whom, you've never even heard of. Before my diagnosis, I never knew Gynecologic Oncologists existed. Why would I, unless someone close had needed one? So here's the thing, there is a specialist oncologist for pretty much every cancer you can think of.

At this point, all you oncologists out there are probably turning red and wanting to strangle me, but, let me tell you, I have the greatest respect for you. There are many cancers that can be diagnosed and treated in an oncologist's office; testicular cancer for one. But sometimes you need both. I have both an oncologist and a gynecologic oncologist. One gives me specialized care and treatment, the other investigates side effects, treats them, and is close by in an emergency. She also holds my hand when I need it, which is pretty often. They both fulfill different roles.

So what's your beef I can hear you asking? Well the problem is, every week I hear of someone who has been operated on, or given treatment by, a general surgeon or doctor. When you hear that big 'C' word, you're first thought isn't going to be "now who's the specialist in this?" I can tell you from experience, your brain is just going to freeze. That's why everyone out there, who could potentially be a spouse or friend in the room when that happens, needs to know that question. Because here's the point. Would you really want your operation done by a general surgeon, who may see a couple of cases a year, or by an oncologic surgeon who sees hundreds.

During my operation, even my specialist surgeon knew she'd reached her limit when she found a large tumor in my diaphragm. She called in an emergency thoracic surgeon. If it wasn't for her expertise, experience, and persistence, others surgeons might have given up on me and closed me up. I can tell you, without any doubt whatsoever, that I wouldn't be here today, without her specialism.

So Joe Hadyman may be able to get rid of your termites for a while, but when they come back 6 months later, won't you wish you'd called a professional instead?

Kay Kerbyson is former Secretary of the Los Alamos Council on Cancer, and Founder/President of Ovarian Cancer Together Inc., the only non-profit specifically supporting women in New Mexico with ovarian cancer. Resources, support and education materials, for those effected by cancer, can be found at www.losalamoscounciloncancer.org and www.ovariancancertogether.org