

# Staying the course

By David H. Henry, MD | Pennsylvania Hospital, Philadelphia, PA

*Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) has beaten back political foes, heart disease, and cancer. So when he announced recently that his Hodgkin's lymphoma has recurred after a 3-year-long remission, he characterized the news in typical fashion: "I expect to beat this too," he said firmly. Now promoting his new book "Never Give In: Battling Cancer in the Senate," Senator Specter spoke with Community Oncology about his experience as a cancer patient, healthcare in the United States, and what he believes the government needs to do to protect the health of Americans.*

**O**n April 16, Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter announced that his Hodgkin's lymphoma, first diagnosed in February 2005 as stage IVB, has recurred. The recurrence was diagnosed after a routine follow-up PET scan, which showed suspicious lymph nodes in his chest and abdomen, and a positive biopsy. His current disease has been staged as IIIA. The Senator will undergo 12 weeks of chemotherapy, the Stanford V protocol.

In interviews given to promote his new book, "Never Give In: Battling Cancer in the Senate," Senator Specter attributed his first recovery from cancer to the care he received, getting enough sleep, continuing to play his beloved squash game, and sheer grit. Even in the midst of debilitating chemotherapy, he dragged himself out of bed, stuck to his routine, and went to work on Capitol Hill to preside over Supreme Court confirmation hearings as Chairman of the Judiciary Committee.

A tenacious five-term Senator, he has faced a number of health challenges: one doctor misdiagnosed him with Lou Gehrig's disease; another physician—a prominent neurosurgeon—told Senator Specter that his malignant brain tumor was fatal. He has had two brain tumor operations and double bypass heart surgery that led to multiple complications, includ-

ing a heart attack. But still, Senator Specter is unbowed.

Recently, we spoke with him about his experience.

**Community Oncology: We were sorry to hear that your Hodgkin's lymphoma has recurred. However, your prognosis is good.**

I was surprised by the PET scan findings because I had no symptoms and have been feeling so good. But I consider this just another bump in the road. My oncologist tells me I have an excellent chance of complete remission and I look forward to getting through this latest treatment and continuing to serve the people of Pennsylvania.

**Although we treat our patients every day, we don't really understand what they are going through. While you were getting your initial therapy, what were the ups and downs?**

Well, the first time it was a hell of a shock to find out I had cancer. Immediately, I wondered whether I would live or die, whether I would be able to perform my job. The chemotherapy was a very rough regimen and very debilitating. But I was determined to face it with a positive approach and walk right through it. For years, I played squash every day and when I had cancer I dragged myself to the

squash court. I couldn't play five or six games like I usually did. I would play two or three and then I literally had to drag myself to the Senate. The work was a great distraction; it didn't give me time to think about myself.

**Past presidents of major US organizations in oncology have themselves dealt with breast cancer and lymphoma. They give spell-binding talks, similar to yours, in which they say they kept working. But they found in the early afternoon they simply had to put their head down because they were so tired from chemotherapy. Were you affected in that way?**

I took power naps when I could squeeze them in. I would usually find a few moments in the morning and in the afternoon to nap. In the Senate, I have what's called a "hideaway." It's a short distance to the Senate floor, so sometimes when a debate would be going on and my colleagues would be a little long-winded, I'd go out and take a snooze.

**What do you think we could be doing better in oncology care?**

I was fortunate to receive excellent care, but we have devoted insufficient resources to medical research that could conquer cancer. In 1970, Richard Nixon declared war on cancer. Had that war been pursued with the same attention as other wars, I

wouldn't have gotten Hodgkin's. On the appropriations subcommittee which covers health, I'm taking a lead role, coordinating with Senator Tom Harkin, to secure more funding for the National Institutes of Health [NIH] and the National Cancer Institute [NCI]. We raised the NIH budget from \$12 billion to \$30 billion, and NCI's budget is now in excess of \$5 billion. As large as those numbers are, they're insufficient. They have leveled off in the past several years, and what we need to do is to get back all the in-

creases that Tom Harkin and I advocated: \$3 billion to \$3.5 billion a year to conquer cancer.

**As you just said, funding is sometimes scarce. Of course, the pharmaceutical companies have the major dollars and they step up to fund research. But we don't want all of our trials to be funded by pharmaceutical companies; we want the NIH and NCI to do that.**

Let me put my finger on one other

problem. We aren't using embryonic stem cells; this is science with an ideology. Twice we passed a Specter/Harkin bill, but it has been vetoed. I believe that it's not a matter of whether we'll use Federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, but when—and the sooner the better.

**Your help in the fight against cancer and your book are really inspirational. They are appreciated very much.**

Well, it's very personal to me.