

Jeb's Got Maggots

by Gary S. Flom, MD, FACS, FAAP, MSPE

Author's note: This is a true story, although virtually everyone who hears it thinks it is fiction!

I am a medical doctor; and, in the 1980s, I had a patient encounter that has stuck with me to this day. I was called to the emergency room to evaluate a patient who had been brought in by his brother. They had made the drive from Southern Missouri to St. Louis because of a tumor that had become infested. As soon as I walked in to evaluate the patient, his brother informed me that “Jeb’s got maggots.” I looked at Jeb and saw a very large cancerous growth on his right cheek, with extension into his mouth. It was virtually covered with maggots. Jeb and his family were not concerned about the tumor—even though it had grown quite large—until the infestation. That was the turning point for them. I cleaned up the area, assessed the growth, and sent Jeb for a CAT scan. The tumor was found to be quite extensive and required removal of nearly his entire right cheek and upper jaw. We covered the area with a skin flap taken from his upper chest.

Jeb’s recovery went well, and he subsequently had chemotherapy as well as radiation treatments. Besides the typical side effects of these therapies, he did remarkably well.

I saw him back in follow-up many times during his post-treatment period. Each time he came back, he looked better—meaning, his personal appearance. At his first visit to the emergency room, his appearance had been quite disheveled, with long, unkempt hair; dirty, threadbare clothes; and poor personal hygiene. But after removal of the tumor, he began taking better care of himself. He had his hair cut and was donning new clothes. He was more confident in himself and no longer embarrassed to be seen in public, now that he was rid of his prior massive



facial growth. Living with the tumor had made him a recluse. The removal of the tumor gave him a new lease on life.

It turned out that Jeb was quite intelligent and very motivated. He applied to, and was accepted at, a regional university. It had been some time since he finished high school; but due to his strong will, he made it through and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in philosophy.

His thirst for knowledge was insatiable, and he continued his education and completed a PhD. He is now a college professor!

Jeb confirmed for me the idiom, “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” When I first met him, in no way did I see him as the person he has now become. This experience taught me that we all have limitless potential, and what we present outwardly to the world doesn’t necessarily reflect our inner talents and potential. Ω