

Let's be honest...

→ Vaclav Havel

Playwright, dissident, and first President of post-communist Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel lost his first wife to cancer in 1996, and was himself diagnosed with lung cancer later that same year. He'd survived years of suppression and imprisonment and had begun to lead his country into a new era. How did Havel now cope with this new challenge? *Cancer World* asked him.

I have to say that my cancer was surgically removed almost as soon as diagnosed, so I really did not experience cancer as a disease. Whatever experience I have is related to its accompanying effects or indirect consequences. A little tumour was discovered at a certain time – and basically by coincidence – in my lungs, which I did not feel or know about and which did not hurt. However, the tumour was very dangerous, growing fast, every day mattered, and therefore I was soon operated.

The surgery went well; it is true I lost a piece of my lung, but the tumour was removed and there were no remnants, metastases or other consequences. Nevertheless, the reduced size of lungs has resulted in a long series of secondary pulmonary ailments and I have also suffered from diverticulitis, which is an intestinal disease. I have become a man who is no longer quite healthy, I have even been through times when I was on the verge of death, and I must forever be very, very careful.

With most serious ailments, it is always very important to have someone close, who gives the patient strength. In my case, it was my wife who gave me strength and helped me, and who was with me through everything.

As for medical care, I observed one thing: it is very advisable to openly discuss such serious diseases with the patient from the very beginning. Unfortunately, the practice in our country – contrary, for example, to America – is not to reveal anything to the patient, particularly if he or she suffers from a serious disease.

The reasons are understandable, of course, but my personal experience is that you are stronger if you know what you are suffering from. The knowledge helps the patient face the disease, as opposed to a situation when he or she is drowning in a bottomless sea of secrets and concealment. I have also found that it is good if doctors can cooperate as colleagues and respect one another. Prestige and envy games are the worst thing a treated patient can encounter, and they invariably turn against the patient at the end of the day.

Doctors are human beings just like anyone else, with all human virtues and vices, they are not something special, but my experience indicates that the more communicative a doctor is, the better he or she gets along with other doctors or nurses, seeks or gives advice, compares opinions or defends his or her position, the better for the patient.

“The more doctors feel able to seek advice
and compare opinions, the better for the patient”

With his second wife, Dagmar Ves Kernova (Dasa). Havel credits her with saving his life. Following surgery to remove half his right lung, he was on a ventilator in intensive care when he seemed to be choking. Dasa was there on a visit, and it was she who summoned help. A few weeks later, Dasa and Vaclav Havel were married



CORBIS SYGMA / CONTRASTO

Vaclav Havel

Living in truth

Telling it as it is has always been more than just a moral imperative for Havel. It is a political weapon that he used first in the 1960s as a playwright who helped propel Czechoslovakia towards the political reforms and cultural revival that became known as the Prague Spring. After the invasion and occupation of his country by Warsaw Pact forces in 1968, and the subsequent political clampdown, Havel would argue that dissent means “living in truth” – a view not always popular with fellow dissenters who advocated a more ideologically based resistance. This same emphasis on personal honesty and integrity was later to infuriate his political aides and allies when, as Czechoslovakia’s first post-communist President, he insisted on voicing his own self doubts in public. Apparently he believes there are those in the medical profession who might also benefit from a greater willingness to admit they may not have all the answers and to seek advice from others.

A life in dates

1936 Havel is born in Prague
 1963–1968 His early plays – *The Garden Party*, *The Memorandum*, *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* – focus on the absurdity and stifling ‘automatism’ of the regime
 1968 In April, the ‘Prague Spring’, demands for a democratic electoral system and freedom of assembly and expression are met. In August, Czechoslovakia is invaded

by Warsaw Pact forces. There is a clampdown on dissent. Havel’s plays are banned
 1975 Havel writes an open letter to the President highlighting the social ills of his country
 1977 He co-founds Charter 77, a human rights initiative, which becomes a focus of dissent
 1977–1989 Havel is repeatedly arrested. In all, he spends almost five years in prison
 1989 The Civic Forum, a coalition of opposition groups pressing for democratic reforms, is established on November 19. The next day Havel addresses a crowd of half a million people in the centre of Prague and tells them to keep demonstrating. The Communist Party agrees to form a coalition government with the Civic Forum. Havel is elected interim President
 1990 Havel is elected first President of post-communist Czechoslovakia
 1993 After Slovakia gets its independence, Havel is elected President of the new Czech Republic
 1996 Havel’s wife, Olga Splíchalová, dies of cancer. Later that year Havel is himself diagnosed with lung cancer and nearly dies following an operation to remove half his right lung
 1998 Havel is re-elected to the Presidency and serves a full five-year term, despite his health problems. In contrast to many figures who led their countries out of the communist era, Havel still retains immense personal respect and authority both at home and abroad.