Coronavirus: Can hydroxychloroquine help with COVID-19 illness? Vero Beach patient says so | Reisman

Laurence Reisman, Treasure Coast Newspapers  Published 2:33 p.m. ET April 1, 2020  Updated 7:23 p.m. ET April 1, 2020

Last week John and Marie McConnell made sure their wills were up to date.

Ill at Cleveland Clinic Indian River Hospital Thursday night and awaiting results of a COVID-19 test after feeling poorly for about two weeks, John McConnell, 65, hit a turning point.

“I knew they were preparing me for ICU and probably a ventilator,” said McConnell, who’d heard survival rates were low for COVID-19 ventilator patients.

The odds were not good for McConnell, a fit, former nationally ranked college tennis player and former senior vice president of programming for ABC Radio who moved to Vero Beach full time in September.

Would he get moved onto a ventilator or try a pharmaceutical unapproved for COVID-19 use, one the head of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration had reservations about?

It wasn’t the first time McConnell faced steep odds.

In 2005, McConnell broke two vertebrae in his neck in a freak bicycling accident near his home on Long Island, New York. Paralyzed for about two hours, there was concern he’d never walk again, McConnell said.

Within a year, he ran in the New York City Marathon, his first, and volunteered for the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation. The foundation, formed after the “Superman” actor was paralyzed in a 1995 equestrian accident, is dedicated to curing spinal cord injury.
In November, the foundation honored McConnell, now its vice chairman, for raising nearly $5 million over the years and being part of a “band of visionaries who refused to believe treatments and therapies for spinal cord injury were decades away.

“Thanks to the unwavering dedication and investment of these leaders, individuals who were paralyzed for years are now taking steps and recovering functions once thought to be lost forever.”

McConnell, executive vice president of an agency representing broadcasters and podcasters, said he has too much faith in people to give up.

One of those people last Thursday was Dr. Gene Posca, the hospitalist taking care of McConnell at Cleveland Clinic.

McConnell had been diagnosed with pneumonia at a walk-in clinic and taken a drive-through test for the coronavirus three days earlier. While results hadn’t come back, all signs, he said, pointed to COVID-19.

Thursday morning, McConnell felt so bad he had to check himself into the hospital.

By nightfall, McConnell said, Posca talked about the pros and cons of treating him with hydroxychloroquine, also known as Plaquenil. It’s used for treating lupus, rheumatoid arthritis and malaria.
The past few weeks it’s been touted by President Donald Trump as promising for battling the coronavirus. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has warned there have not been enough controlled studies to determine whether hydroxychloroquine is effective.

What's more, some areas, such as Detroit, have had shortages of hydroxychloroquine because it has been diverted to help COVID-19 patients.

Thursday, though, McConnell put his trust in Posca, not the FDA, which only on Sunday authorized emergency use of hydroxychloroquine to combat COVID-19 under specific conditions and for the most severe cases.

"I knew there was internal debate about whether to put me on the Plaquenil," said McConnell, noting Posca answered all his questions. "I had no hesitation. I told him 'my trust is with you.' "

Friday morning, though, things were worse. McConnell's temperature peaked at 103.5 degrees.

"(On the phone) Marie and I were saying goodbyes to one another, and my kids were, too," McConnell said. "But the Plaquenil was working in my system. The luck of the timing is what made the difference."

By Friday night, there was no more ventilator talk, McConnell said. By Saturday, he began to feel better.
"If you keep up this trouble, we're going to have to throw you out," McConnell said a heroic medical team told him.

On Monday, the day he got his positive COVID-19 test back, McConnell headed home.

"I'm a lot better," he told me, in a talkative mood Tuesday afternoon. "Day by day I feel a little bit better. I just hope I can keep getting stronger and not get exposed again."

Angela Dickens, a hospital spokesperson, declined to comment on McConnell's case for privacy reasons. She did say Cleveland Clinic doctors, including possibly Posca, have prescribed hydroxychloroquine in COVID-19 cases "when appropriate."

She cautioned the drug is not a panacea and the best way to stay safe is to follow hand-washing and social-distancing protocol, including staying home, strategies promoted by the White House coronavirus task force.

Thinking back, McConnell said he's not sure how he caught COVID-19. He said he felt a little "funky" March 9, but certainly well enough to fly to New York for work March 11-12. Talk of the coronavirus had only begun to get serious there, he said.

On March 15, McConnell said, his wife came down with a sinus infection. By March 18, however, McConnell began to think something was seriously wrong with him: He felt awful and continued to sleep.

McConnell said the first walk-in clinicians he visited thought he might have diabetes. On March 23, he learned he had pneumonia, which ultimately landed him in the hospital.

It gave McConnell an appreciation for the courageous team of medical experts sweating around the clock to save lives in coveralls, gloves, masks and other personal protective equipment.
“They really are heroes,” he said. “They just keep working through it.”

He had special words for Posca.

“If he had not made that decision (based on my markers), I wouldn’t have made it,” McConnell said. “I was too sick. He is somebody I will never forget.”

The experience showed him how tough it is for families, separated from their loved ones.

“It’s cruel when you think something bad is about to happen and they are your everything and all you can do is talk to them; you can’t touch them, or hold them or look at them,” he said.

“I know how lucky and blessed I have been,” McConnell said, citing the strength relatives and many of the friends he’s met in Vero Beach have given him the past week or so.

After the bicycle accident, McConnell said he was compelled to “pay forward” the gift of a paralysis-free life. He dove into the Reeve Foundation and built his body back. Until his illness, he played tennis at a high level for his age.

Like the accident, the coronavirus forced him to face his mortality.

“It’s been obviously the most horrible week someone can have,” McConnell said.

Don’t be surprised to see him pay something else forward when he gets better.

This column reflects the opinion of Laurence Reisman. Support his work by subscribing to TCPalm. (https://cm.tcpalm.com/specialoffer/) Contact him via email at larry.reisman@tcpalm.com, phone at 772-978-2223, Facebook.com/larryreisman or Twitter @LaurenceReisman

Read or Share this story: https://www.tcpalm.com/story/opinion/columnists/laurence-reisman/2020/04/01/vero-beach-man-cleveland-clinic-hydroxychloroquine-saved-life-opinion/5100792002/