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## ‘I’m still here’

NA man living proof new cancer-fighting treatments are improving survival rates

**BY RICK FOSTER**  
SUN CHRONICLE STAFF

**B**efore R. Dana Towle was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma in 1999, he associated cancer with a death sentence.

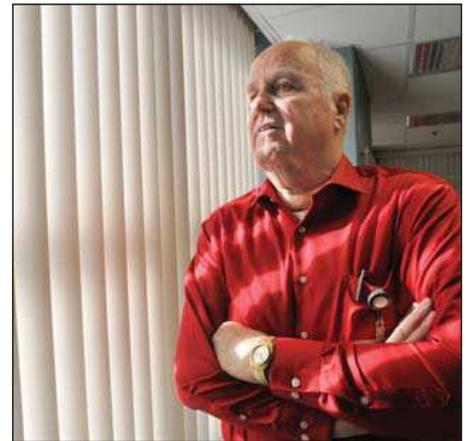
But that was before he underwent a novel form of chemotherapy that helps anti-cancer drugs target and kill malignant cells. After a long series of

scans and follow-up appointments, Towle was declared free of the aggressive cancer.

That was 15 years ago.

“I’m still here,” said a smiling Towle, 73, a retired fire protection consultant who volunteers to assist patients at Sturdy Memorial Hospital’s Oncology Outpatient Clinic in Attleboro.

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**TOM MAGUIRE** / THE SUN CHRONICLE

After fighting non-Hodgkin lymphoma 15 years ago, R. Dana Towle, 73, of North Attleboro now volunteers at Sturdy Memorial Hospital’s Oncology Outpatient Clinic in Attleboro.

# TREATMENTS: More surviving cancer now

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Towle, a North Attleboro resident, credits his survival to advances in cancer treatment, his doctors and support from his family.

Today, Towle is emblematic of a revolution in cancer diagnosis and treatment that has dramatically improved the survival rates in all forms of cancer over the past 20 years.

According to the latest report by the American Cancer Society, the overall cancer mortality rate in the United States dropped 22 percent from 1990 to 2011.

During the same period, the death rate from breast cancer fell 35 percent; lung cancer, 36 percent; and prostate and colorectal cancer, 47 percent.

"I used to think of cancer as a death sentence," Towle said. "But after I was diagnosed, I did some research and found out it was different."

"A lot of advances have been made over the years in the treatment of cancer."

Towle, who received his treatment at Sturdy, believes he was the first patient there to receive a new form of chemotherapy called R-CHOP. While there were no guarantees at the time, Towle believes it was a key to defeating his cancer.

R-CHOP has now become a standard therapy in cancer treatment.

## New drugs, better diagnostic tools

New drugs, better diagnostic tools and research have contributed to new hope for cancer patients and their families in the 21st century.

Dr. Colleen Yavaro, an oncologist-hematologist at Sturdy Memorial Hospital, said early detection, as well as new drugs and therapies have contributed mightily to the fight against cancer.

"We've seen a big change from the days years ago when people were diagnosed, but it was often too late," she said. "Today, we're finding early-stage cancers that would never have been detected back then."

With advanced tests and imaging giving patients and doctors a head start in battling cancer, more patients are surviving and benefitting from rapidly evolving treatments.

New drugs in some cases can target and kill cancer cells with minimal harm to surrounding tissue.

Dr. Alan Rosmarin, a member of the New England Division American Cancer Society of Massachusetts board of directors and chief of hematology and oncology at UMass Medical Center in Worcester, said changes in diet and exercise, early diagnosis and more effective treatments have all contributed to reducing cancer deaths.



TOM MAGUIRE / THE SUN CHRONICLE

R. Dana Towle of North Attleboro credits his survival of non-Hodgkin lymphoma to advances in cancer treatment, his doctors and support from his family.

Societal changes, such as deep reductions in smoking, have helped contribute to the major drop in cancer deaths, while changes in diet and advances in imaging and diagnostic testing are helping to prevent or detect cancers earlier when they are most curable.

"There's been a revolution in the management of cancers in the last 10 to 15 years, and the pace is accelerating," Rosmarin said.

He says targeted therapies to seek out and destroy malignancies are helping patients to survive and recover while creating far fewer toxic side effects.

Even cancers once thought highly resistant to therapy, such as metastatic melanoma and certain kidney cancers, are being subjected to new approaches that promise better results with fewer toxic effects.

However, unhealthy behaviors, such as increases in obesity rates, continue to pose cancer risks to the general population.

While progress in medicine and personal health habits have helped reduce the number of cancer deaths, patients who have undergone successful treatments still aren't out of the woods.

Post-treatment fatigue, side effects from chemo and radiation and stress over financial burdens, doctors' appointments and daily living often weigh heavily on survivors.

Many hospitals and health care providers are responding to those situations by creating special follow-up teams that provide patients with monitoring and advice in negotiating aftercare and recovery.

One of those is Sturdy Memorial Hospital, which is working on be-

coming certified as a STAR (Survivorship Training and Rehab) program through Oncology Rehab Partners.

STAR uses interdisciplinary teams at member hospitals to guide cancer patients through their recovery with the objective of better long-term outcomes.

"We've recognized that survivors have many issues beyond just their cancer treatment," said Karen Messier, Sturdy clinical manager. "They face the question, 'What now?'"

Even when they emerge from the hospital, cancer survivors often face major life changes, follow-up appointments, screenings and challenges at home.

## Having a 'game plan'

The STAR program, headed by a nurse navigator and aided by a team of specialists, seeks to smooth the way to recovery by providing a survivorship "game plan" that includes screenings and referrals.

In some cases, recommendations might include home care during a patient's recovery.

While lifesaving surgeries, radiation and chemotherapy have come a long way in reducing cancer deaths, Messier said, essential follow-up care can speed recovery and contribute to a survivor's long-term health.

Studies of the sickest cancer patients have shown they live longer and have a better quality of life when they are afforded thorough follow-up care.

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