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## Ukiah man recounts lifesaving treatment for flesh eating bacteria



Bob Rankin revisits the Hyperbaric chamber that was used for his flesh eating bacteria treatment at the UVMC Advanced Wound Center. (Nathan DeHart-Ukiah Daily Journal)

By Adam Randall, [udjar@ukiahdj.com](mailto:udjar@ukiahdj.com), [@udjadam](#) on Twitter

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Bob Rankin remembers the year 2014 well as he spent most of it seeking medical attention for a potentially deadly ailment.

In March of the same year, a month after he felt a small lump on his back, Rankin was admitted to the emergency room at Ukiah Valley Medical Center with necrotizing fasciitis, an aggressive form of flesh eating bacteria.

“I had just felt lethargic and had no appetite, and for two weeks I only had the top of a Hot Pocket and a fruit cup,” Rankin said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says the illness is relatively rare, although each year nationwide there is somewhere between 650 to 800 cases of necrotizing fasciitis caused by group A Streptococcus, which is considered to be the leading cause of the ailment that can also be caused by more than one bacteria.

Group A strep bacteria is generally easily treated with antibiotics, but in some cases, toxins from the bacteria can leach into the body via a cut, scrape, burn, insect bite or puncture wound, according to the CDC. From there, the bacteria feeds on soft tissue, moving throughout the body.

Jared Chaney, program director for UVMC’s Advanced Wound Center, said this type of bacteria is capable of spreading across the body at a rate of 6 inches an hour.

Rankin, a 62-year-old retiree, described his overall health prior to the incident as good, and didn’t recall having so much as a prescription up to the age of 60, nor did he routinely frequent doctors for

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medical attention, he said.

However, Rankin was unaware prior to his trip to the ER that the lump on his back he once thought to be meaningless, was really a serious infection that was eating away at the flesh below.

“I had no idea what was going on before the ER visit,” Rankin said.

He said the ER trip was really at the urging of his sister, and while he lay in a hospital bed, recalled overhearing a doctor’s conversation who said he probably would have been dead within 12 hours if he didn’t seek treatment that very day.

Following the ER visit and surgery to remove the dead tissue in his back, which resulted in a hole the size of a football, Rankin spent eight days in the Intensive Care Unit at UVMC before recuperating at Redwood Cove Healthcare Center in Ukiah, and then finished his treatment at the Advanced Wound Center.

Chaney said UVMC’s Wound Center averages about 300 cases a month, with the majority of the patients being treated for diabetic foot ulcers. Besides the Ukiah facility, there are only two other locations that offer Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy – Arcata and Healdsburg, he said.

It was at the Advanced Wound Center where Rankin started his recovery, with a little help from the Hyperbaric chamber, or the administration of oxygen therapy.

Oxygen therapy allows a patient to breathe 100 percent oxygen, or two to three times greater than atmospheric pressure, according to UVMC materials.

By forcing more oxygen into the tissue, the therapy encourages the formation of new blood vessels, which then delivers more oxygen to the affected area, and in turn, helps repair damaged tissue.

Each weekday for the first month and a half, Rankin said he received 90-minute outpatient hyperbaric treatments, in a chamber that resembled something from NASA.

“When we first met Bob he was white as a sheet, and three days after therapy he came out of the haze a little bit,” Chaney said. “We have seen a couple of cases like this here, but thankfully not a lot.”

Rankin estimated it was around three months before he started feeling significantly better.

The day before Christmas was Rankin’s last visit at the Wound Center.

The scar on his back remains, only a partial reminder of the illness that nearly took his life. Rankin estimates he has lost some of his upper body strength due to the amount of tissue that was taken out of his back.

Rankin said he has no ill-wills about revisiting the Wound Center. He said he still has occasional follow-up doctors appointments, but was told he is in the clear now, and isn’t scared if the infection were to come back.

“This is a good place and I have nothing but good feelings here,” Rankin said about the Wound Center. “Good stuff happens here.”

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