

Iola man survives COVID-19

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Doug (left) and Linda Hines at home following Doug's battle with COVID-19. Holly Neumann Photo

Three-month ordeal in multiple hospitals

By Holly Neumann

Doug Hines' family considers it a miracle that he survived the ordeal and returned home after battling COVID-19. The 63-year-old Iola man spent 98 days in the hospital. Hines, who had no underlying health conditions, began to feel ill while he was up north with family. "I started coughing quite a bit," he said. "After a couple days, I said we have to go home." Once home, Hines drove to Waupaca for a Covid test, then waited four to five days for results.

While in the shower the day after his test, Hines began to cough so hard he could barely make it out. "He was white as a ghost," said his wife Linda. "He said he thought he was dying. He said that he could not breathe." At this point, the couple knew they needed to do something.

At this point, Hines has trouble recalling what he all went through. On Friday, Aug. 7, a rapid test confirmed he had COVID-19 and he was admitted into the hospital. By Saturday Hines needed oxygen.

On Sunday, doctors started him on Remdesivir antiviral treatment and plasmapheresis, a process that temporarily removes plasma from the blood in order to control antibodies that may be attacking the patient's own body.

Struggling to Breathe

With oxygen levels that still were not high enough, hospital staff put Hines in a prone position to try to get these levels up and prevent him from going on a ventilator. The family was unable to go into the hospital, but through face time, they were able to see Doug struggling to breathe. "It got to the point where he said he could not do this anymore," said Linda. "We told him it was OK, as we did not want to see him struggle." One week into his battle Hines was put on a ventilator. "This was the hardest decision I had to make," said Linda, with tears in her eyes. "We had heard that once covid patients go on a ventilator, they are not going to make it. I thought I was never going to see him alive again."

Along the way Doug battled pneumonia, his kidney's shut down and he continued to test positive for COVID-19. Doctors informed the family that a tracheostomy may be necessary, but the procedure was not safe for them to do at the time. The family began to look for other facilities to transfer him to, when the doctors finally agreed to do the procedure. After 21 days on a ventilator Hines safely received the first tracheostomy in a covid positive patient. Doctors decided to start reducing his sedation. "My dad did not respond well to this, becoming unresponsive in regard to his brain not doing what they expected," said daughter Ashley Gunderson. The doctor recommended hospice care. "I told them I wanted my husband back," said Linda. "My kids wanted their dad."

Horrorifying Situation

"It was horrifying," added Ashley. "He had been healthy a few weeks ago and suddenly they don't want to fight for him? We explained that they could not stop fighting for him, there had to be something more that could be done." A CT scan ruled out the possibility of a stroke. It was determined that Hines was suffering from delirium due to the weeks of sedation. Sputum from Doug's lungs was sent to Madison for a more accurate reading to determine if he was still Covid positive. "It was the hardest thing in the world," said Linda. "His eyes were open, but just staring. He appeared to be looking right through me. It was not a pretty sight. When I sat with him, I tried to be strong, but when I left that room I broke down."

Once the delirium passed, it took Doug sometime to recognize family. He was unable to talk, because of the ventilator, or move due to atrophy in his muscles. "I could not do anything," said Doug. "I could not move my legs or fingers. I had to talk by nodding my head. It was frustrating."

On Sept. 22, Hines was moved to Select Specialty Hospital in Madison, where he was weaned off the ventilator. He started physical therapy to build up his strength. On Oct. 29, Hines was moved to ThedaCare Regional Medical Center-Neenah for more extensive therapy to prepare for going home. He had to learn how to use his hands, arms and legs. "He even had to learn how to eat by himself and to walk again," said Linda.

Returning Home

Finally on Nov. 13, Hines was released from the hospital. "It felt great to be outside and to smell the fresh air," he said. You can still hear a raspiness in his voice when Doug explains that he is feeling better. "I feel OK, but I want my body back," he said, with a slight raspiness remaining in his voice. "They tell me it could take over a year to get back to normal."

“All in all, he is doing quite well,” added Linda. “His lungs are healthy, but weak. He still has a long road ahead of him.” Linda stated the Covid has damaged a lot of the organs in his body. “They are still treating his lungs. At one point they said his diaphragm was like cement,” said Linda. “He will need to see kidney and pulmonary doctors in the near future.”

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Doug thanked medical staff everywhere for putting their own lives on the line to help Covid patients. “This is a special group of people,” he said. The family thanked all those who reached out to them during this difficult time. “We had people that we didn’t even know reach out to us or send cards,” said Doug. “The community overwhelmed us.”

“We learned just how many lives dad has touched along this journey through life this far,” added Ashley. “There was an outpouring of people who reached out to my mom, myself and all my siblings. People making meals, sending gas cards and praying for him.”