

Case Report: 92 Years Young

By Paul T. Finger, MD, and Carina T. Sanvicente, MD

In 1995, Mrs. Gisela Dollinger was a healthy 92-year-old Holocaust survivor who was referred to our center for treatment of a choroidal melanoma in her left eye. This T2-sized choroidal melanoma (according to the American Joint Committee on Cancer staging system) was located anterior to the equator, and it was 5.9 mm in thickness and 10 mm in largest basal diameter. Mrs. Dollinger's initial visual acuity (VA) was 20/25 in both eyes. A metastatic survey was normal.

Mrs. Dollinger lived alone. She played bridge with her friends every day and got around New York City by walking and by taking buses and taxis by herself. When we discussed treatment options with her and her niece, she initially didn't want to pursue any intervention. She said, "I'm 92, I don't feel anything, how long do you expect me to live?" Given the tumor's size and location, Dr. Finger knew she would have an excellent result and said, "You have no other problems, so you could live for 10 more years and with good vision in the treated eye. I don't want you to die from metastatic melanoma." She responded in her old-world way: "Dr. Finger, for you, I'll do it." Soon after, she underwent palladium-103 plaque brachytherapy.

Mrs. Dollinger's results surpassed all expectations with no change in vision for another 9 years. During that time, she continued playing bridge, reading *The New York Times*, and, most important, maintaining her independence.

Unfortunately, at age 101, Mrs. Dollinger started to show symptoms of AMD. Four years later, at age 105, her vision in her good (non-cancerous) eye dropped from 20/40 to 20/125 due to wet AMD. Although her vision in this eye was rescued to a mean 20/63 with periodic intravitreal anti-VEGF therapy, delivered over several years, it became increasingly difficult for her to keep up the frequency of her injection visits. She developed irreversible changes of the macula and became legally blind in that eye. Meanwhile, the left eye (the one with the choroidal melanoma) became her better eye with a VA of 20/40. (Eventually, AMD also affected the left eye. Even so, her VA in that eye was 20/50 until 2011.)

Mrs. Dollinger returned for her last visit with us in October of 2012. At that time, she was 110 years old. Her VA was 20/200 in her right eye and 20/100 in the left. Periodic bouts of pneumonia had kept her cycling in and out of the

hospital. Still mentally sharp, she lamented that she was no longer able to play bridge and that her hearing had diminished. However, she continued to enjoy spending time with her family. Mrs. Dollinger died in March of 2014, at the age of 111. Her final words to her grandnephew were "I've had a very good life."

Age Versus Treatment?

Uveal melanoma patients often ask about how their age affects their diagnosis and treatment. We tell them that the median age is 60 years and the incidence tends to drop off after 69.5. However, an increasing number of patients older than 90 years are presenting. When they ask if their advanced age will protect them from metastasis, we note that the answer is, unfortunately, no.¹

Some patients also ask about their life expectancy. As a reference, the U.S. Census Bureau suggests that the average 92-year-old patient will live an additional 4.3 years and will most likely die from heart disease, cancer, or stroke.²

Cases like Mrs. Dollinger's will likely become more prevalent as our population grows older, and we, as physicians, must be prepared. In this particular case, we had an autonomous, lucid, 92-year-old woman presenting with a life- and sight-threatening condition. She was treated with a safe intervention.

However, not all cases involving the oldest old will be as easily resolved. As technology enhances the way we take care of patients, more will be offered to extend the life of elderly patients; and with that in mind, we should try to individualize care. Mrs. Dollinger initially thought that her age precluded a fight to live longer. But with help, her life and the vision of what became her better functioning eye were preserved for 18 years, and she died of natural causes.

1 Collaborative Ocular Melanoma Study Group. *Arch Ophthalmol*. 2006;124(12):1684-1693.

2 Retirement & Survivors Benefits Life Expectancy Calculator, available at www.ssa.gov/OACT/population/longevity.html. Accessed Sept. 12, 2016.

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