

Journey To The Mexican “Stem Cell” Clinic ©
by Al Bergstein

The following story is a chapter of a longer book/article I have been writing on my late wife’s journey through cancer. I was not planning on “publishing” this story at this time, and I have changed the names of some of the people, but given that recently ABC.com published a very positive story about Dr. Diaz, I felt I had to give another side to his work, one that I found very disturbing in retrospect. The ABC story can be found at: <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/print?id=2854999>)

Sick people are traveling long distances, and some are spending their life savings, perhaps meager savings to be “cured” by Dr. Diaz and others like him. Dr. Diaz has been quoted saying that he uses “live cells” and not “stem cells”. But, as you will read, this is a very small distinction to his patients, many of whom are in full belief he is using stem cells. In addition, his methods hardly qualify as methodology that researchers use or accept. He may actually be harming his patients, or hastening their deaths. If he is, in fact, using steroids, rather than some “stem cell magic”, then people should know, and pay appropriately. It would be worthy of Dr. Diaz to allow a full independent review of his methods by other independent medical staff, such as the medical school of the University of Mexico (UNAM) , and submit qualified peer review capable documentation. Failing that, his work seems like a something less than real medicine.

No reuse of this in any for-profit publication is allowed without first my written permission. Any of you working with patients who say that they may want to go to a stem cell clinic, especially since the publication of the ABC.com story, can share this freely, as long as there is no fee being charged to share it.

I hopefully will be finishing the longer piece, from which this is extracted, within the next six months. I am actively seeking a publisher for the completed story.

Al Bergstein
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We had been hearing about the Mexican stem cell clinic for a few months. My wife's aunt and uncle lived in Yuma in the winter. They had been to see the doctor who ran the clinic.

Yuma is a town of 88,000 in southwestern Arizona. Sitting in the middle of the Sonoran Desert, it straddles the border of Mexico, which you would think make it ground zero of the controversy over illegal immigration. However, it's just plain far from anywhere. Phoenix is well over an hour away, and the American Border Patrol are a strong presence. Yuma is a retirement town. The 95,000 *visitors* a year during the winter months are not there just for its remote beauty, as the city is surrounded by lots of flat barren desert, a few hills to the east. They come for its climate and access to cheap Mexican prescription drugs, medical and dental care. You wouldn't be wrong to assume that it just sprung up overnight, since it doesn't have much of what anyone would call a downtown, mainly a sprawl of strip malls and suburban housing tracks. But it has been here since the 1500's.

The elderly flock there, primarily in the winter, by the tens of thousands. While Yuma has its subdivisions, like most of America, it also has vast tracks of mobile homes, pleasant places where the retirees congregate, with community centers and activities every day. But it also is more telling to travel just outside of town. There are motor homes of the landless scattered all over the countryside, some in the most inhospitable places, as if The Wizard of Oz's tornado had swept through Kansas and deposited the \$100,000 (or higher) rolling home out here.

The real action isn't in Yuma though, but about 10 miles west, across the small border crossing at Los Algodones. You won't even find a mention of Los Algodones on Yuma's official web site. Los Algodones has become the reason that most of these elderly Americans drive down to Yuma, rather than elsewhere in Arizona. It is a small town that nestles up to the border. As you cross through the border, usually waved through if you are white and over 50, you are faced with what appears to be a Mexican town that defies the normal statistics of "poor" Mexico. None of the squalor of other border towns such as Tijuana show here. The small downtown is buzzing with activity, shops advertising all sorts of extremely low cost prescription drugs. It appears that many of the shop owners seem to drive BMW's. To all appearances, it seems to be doing very well.

It is hard to know whether there is real regulation of the prescription drug industry in Mexico. You wouldn't know it by looking at Los Algodones. Anything you want is hawked here on the streets, in front of the stores. Runners come to your car, willing to watch your car, or even park it right in front, if you are too infirm. There is no way to be sure that the pill that claims to be a regulated drug is not fake. A close friend who is a doctor in the US and has worked on a state board of physicians has analyzed some of the drugs coming in, and says that a very high percentage appear to be fakes. He calls it a growth industry for crime syndicates.

The people buying drugs there want to believe these pills are real. But they have no way of knowing.

Just outside of the downtown core are the clinics, setup for medical and dental care. And that's where you will find Dr. Jose Diaz Barboza, whom we had been told was the "stem cell doctor".

Karen's aunt and uncle had been going to see Dr. Diaz because of John's unspecified health problems. He had been having various serious attacks over the last few years, and they were getting worse. I loved John. He was an old time West Coast liberal, had knocked around after WWII, fished in Alaska for many years, lived alone on an island up there, ended up getting a job driving a beer truck and was involved in some of the nastiest labor strikes that occurred during the 50's in Seattle. He had been an alcoholic (now reformed) and a brawler. His flattop crew cut, and wiry tough demeanor belied a kindness and humor that were always a wonderful counterpart to the Calvinist attitude of much of the rest of her family. He was an unabashed liberal and would rail at the Republicans in office, to the dismay of the born again Christians present.

John and Anne had been seeing the stem cell doctor, and reported good results. John would go over the border, pay a large sum of money to the doctor who, John said, was injecting him with something that John believed were stem cells. John would then feel good enough to walk away "healed" for some length of time. John claimed his brother, suffering from emphysema, had gone to the doctor, had one shot, and got rid of his breathing canister. Karen was intrigued, and I was curious enough to go along with this to see what this man was doing down there. We luckily had enough money that it wouldn't matter much if it didn't work. If it did, it would be wonderful.

We bought a new van for the trip, as Karen wasn't able to fly in her condition, and the old van was not reliable enough. Contacting the doctor's office by phone, they then hooked us up with the doctor via email. He would be available in the weeks after January 1. It would be a good fit, as I could take vacation time off, we could see my folks in Tucson, see John and Anne, and also meet the mysterious man who had created the software for Karen's "magic QXSI machine". (described in a previous chapter).

The trip down was hard. We had setup the back of the van for her to lie in, since she couldn't sit up. Her father had built a floor panel for her and we had installed special foam for her to lie on. With the cancer growing in her lower spine, every bump of the road brought pain. She was fighting the need to take morphine, as she believed it would be admitting defeat if she did.

The “Miracle” Doctor

We had called Dr. Diaz's clinic to setup the appointment, but were told that there were no "appointments", in the normal sense of that word. The patient was expected to show up first thing in the morning and sign in at the front desk. I thought that a rather odd way to run a medical business. The clinic would open at 8:30, so, given the distance that people had come to see him, it seemed wise to show up early. We crossed the border easily at 7:30, arriving just minutes later at the clinic, in a typical residential area on the outskirts of the main part of town. A van was already parked outside the door. We parked behind them, and waited. At 8:30 the door opened and I went inside to sign up. I was told that it would probably be a few hours before we would see the Doctor, which I also thought odd since there was only one name in front of ours.

The clinic waiting room was clean, a TV played with a Mexican soap opera and other standard morning fare in Spanish. There was a small breezeway that attached a house next door with the typical gate between them. I assumed it was the doctor's home. A tall assistant rushed in and out, I wasn't sure what his job was. Apparently, there was also a dentist attached to the clinic. Cheap Mexican dental work is another reason people cross the border.

Finally, around 11, the receptionist ushered us into an office down the hall. The room was large, and spare. The doctor sat behind an ordinary desk, with an examining table in the far corner. Some bookshelves with medical books were behind him, along with pictures of family. His degrees were on the wall. The room gave the appearance of being larger than needed, and rather spare for such a formidable job as stem cell injections.

Dr. Diaz spoke very fluent English, with a mild accent. He explained to us that he had gotten his medical degree in Cuba, and had come to Mexico after practicing there for many years. He said he had become excited by the new advances in stem cell research and that he wanted to be able to attempt cutting edge work that couldn't be done in the US. He claimed to have been at many conferences over the last few years on the latest in stem cell research, and I have no reason to doubt that he may well have been. (Later I tried to see if he had published any peer review papers at these conferences. The answer appeared to be no). His treatments, he said, were of two types. One was stem cells that were lamb cells, less potent, and the other, a more expensive treatment were human cells. Since this visit, I have heard the doctor quoted that he actually injects “live cells” from umbilical cords, but that was not what he was saying behind closed doors in his office, nor was it what any of the people who we discussed had heard when they were there. He was clear that he was concerned about the source of the cells, and that they were not from aborted fetuses. His idea was to inject the cells in the area of the cancer, where they would hopefully pick up the characteristics of the normal cells, reproducing rapidly because of their age (embryonic cells repro-

duce faster than cells of mature humans, that's why you stop growing at some age). This infusion of new healthy cells would then hopefully overwhelm the cancer cells, killing them. I asked about how long all this would take, and he said that Karen should see some results immediately, but that the cancer should be in remission within three to four weeks. I asked if we would need to do another treatment, and he said, no. It probably would be enough, though it might be needed. It all sounded rather rational. We discussed costs, and he said that the lamb cells were \$7,000 and the human cells were \$14,000. Others who have been quoted in the press appear to have paid less. My guess is that he charges whatever he thinks you can or will pay, and he asks lots of questions about your lifestyle and work before the money is ever discussed. He said he'd take check or cash. I told him we'd pay in check. He was fine with that. It all put us at ease.

We agreed and he said that today, he would inject Karen with some special patented vitamins that he had invented, and put her in a hyperbaric chamber (the kind that is used to de-pressurize scuba divers with the "bends".) which he claimed would relieve some of the pressure on her spine. That would be part of the cost, no extra charge. He would put her in it for an hour, and again tomorrow after the next treatment. Normally the charge would be \$100 USD. He had her get on the examining table, did a cursory examination, and then got out a clear vial and needle, and injected her with the "vitamins", just under the skin. I knew enough to know that the depth of the injection was very shallow, and thought that somewhat odd, that he wasn't attempting to find a vein. I asked him what was in the injection, and he said that he had found a special mixture of vitamins that he had "patented" and that they would help with the uptake of the stem cells. Later, a friend's wife, who is a medical doctor, told me that what Diaz had injected were most likely steroids. Apparently, steroids are used to reduce the swelling in cancer sites, due to the swelling in attacked areas that surround the primary cancer site.

A thought crossed my mind as I saw all this happening. Dr. Diaz claimed to be doing "experimental" work, seeing what would be successful, and what wouldn't. He claimed he wanted to find the right 'cure' and help people with that cure. However, as someone who has done cursory work in trying to find root causes of technical problems, and applying some scientific method to that act, I was surprised to see that Dr. Diaz kept no records, not even a patient file was open on his desk. A normal person would assume that a researcher, or a doctor on the edge of medical advances, would want to keep copious notes, so that when the time came that he would go to present his radical new findings to others, he could allow a peer review of his information to support his claims. There was none of this. He chatted away with us for over two hours, on a variety of topics related to all his work. At the end of the two hours, he asked Karen how she was feeling.

She said, "Much better!" And apparently she was. She was able to walk, without the assistance of her crutches, out to the van. She still appeared to be in pain, as

she was moving very slowly, extremely jerky movements. It was all very impressive. I asked if we needed to get there so early on the following day, and he said, "No, we will work you in. Just arrive around 8:30." He did not even ask for money at that time, saying we could pay the next day.

The following day, we arrived back at the clinic at 8:30, and were ushered past the receptionist and into the hyperbaric chamber. They asked if I wanted to go in also, but I declined. There was a young girl, with what appeared to be polio, and Karen talked to her throughout the hour that she was in the chamber. I sat outside and read.

When we were once again ushered into the doctor's office, about 11 AM, the first thing he said was, "So! How are you feeling today?"

Karen said she was fine, but obviously not healed. She was walking again today with the canes, and the pain was lessened, she said.

"Great!" was the reply. He, once again began chatting about the differences between the two treatments he offered, and made it clear that the human cells were, "more effective". We told him we would choose the higher cost, as her condition was serious, we didn't want to come back down here. We felt she needed the most effective treatment. I paid him with a check, and he proceeded to open the refrigerator in his office, and extract a vial of milky, somewhat reddish liquid. He explained that the cells were frozen, and would require a short time to defrost. He rolled the vial in his hands, like rolling a cigar. We continued chatting about stem cell research.

A humorous aside now happened. I believe it was genuine, though it could have been a hoax. His secretary came in and seemed to be saying that there was someone here to see him, something about a school. He excused himself to us, saying that there was a small matter he needed to attend to. We waited about 30 minutes, and could hear him talking to another man outside the door. The door opened and the two of them came in, followed by a child of about 12. The Doctor and the man, who was well dressed, chatted a while longer, and I could understand something about some kind of barbecue, along with a discussion of rain. The doctor and man shook hands and the man and child left. Dr. Diaz turned to us, "That was my son and the principal of his school." He laughed.

"I thought my son was in trouble, that the principal would bring him here, but as you know, there has been much rain lately." It had, in fact, been a very rainy winter, even for Arizona standards.

"Apparently the school roof has been leaking a great deal. All the classrooms are leaking. I am a man of substance here in Los Algodones, and the principal said that they don't have the money to put a new roof on the school. I told him that I would hold a barbecue to do what you Americans call a "fundraiser", I believe. I

will invite all the doctors of the town and have them all donate to the new roof. We will make this happen.” We all chuckled.

He then injected Karen with the stem cells. It did hurt her a bit. He had her lie down and wait a while. She didn't improve immediately like she had the previous day. Eventually, after some 30 minutes or so, he told her she could leave. I helped her out to the van, and we drove back off to Arizona.

We left Arizona after that. The drive back up the coast was extremely strenuous. Karen seemed to worsen as the days advanced. Her pain as she lie there in the back bed of the van, was overwhelming and extremely hard for me to ignore. She rarely would ever yell out, but her constant inhaling deeply and quickly through gritted teeth told me that she was in very bad shape.

On the way back, as we drove through Oregon, we had a very odd coincidence. We were listening to National Public Radio's Science Friday, and Ira Flatow was interviewing the leading stem cell research scientist in the United States. Ira was asking him what the state of the art was in regards to stem cell research and what needed to happen next. Karen was listening intently.

(It's still available online. You will need either Real Networks player or Windows Media Player to listen in. It's about a 15 minute segment.)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4273768>

The stem cell researcher said that they were still some years from being able to use stem cells for treatment of any disease. He said that they just couldn't inject stem cells into a patient with cancer, for example. There was no guarantee that the cells wouldn't take on the cancerous cell growth, as opposed to the healthy cell growth. It seemed to be a blow to her. Karen had never really wanted to understand whether the work Dr. Diaz was engaged in was actually based in science. She had accepted it all as a very real possibility. The story on the radio made it clear that there was no way that Dr. Diaz could be engaged in science. We drove on, and she had nothing to say for a very long time.

We never saw Dr. Diaz again, nor did he ever contact us to find out if Karen improved. Her uncle John died of his illnesses in June. His brother's emphysema also returned. I considered the cost of the trip as our contribution to a poor Mexican school getting a new roof.

