

How brain surgery saved the life of a patient preparing to die

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John Moran was 27 years old when he underwent a long-shot brain surgery for what appeared to be a malignant tumor that would almost certainly be fatal.

But Dr. Douglas Anderson, a Loyola University Medical Center neurosurgeon, thought it was worth trying to save the life of the young father of three. And against all expectations, the growth turned out to be a benign abscess, not cancer. Anderson removed the abscess and Moran made a complete recovery.

That was 24 years ago. Moran, 51, went on to have a long and rewarding career as an FBI special agent. He and his wife, Deborah, now have nine children and four grandchildren.

Through the years, Moran has thought frequently about his remarkable surgery. So he decided recently to e-mail Anderson a heartfelt note, thanking the surgeon once again for saving his life.

"Your efforts have never been forgotten," Moran wrote. "Because of you, we have celebrated 28 years of marriage and have been blessed with a wonderful life."

Anderson said it was "gratifying and humbling" to receive Moran's note. "It is a wonderful reminder that we are part of a larger story," he said.

Moran recalled that before his surgery, he suffered terrible, pounding

headaches on the left side of his head. In between the headaches, he experienced partial seizures that caused strange, troubling sensations. He would smell things that weren't there. And in social gatherings, other people did not seem real. He suffered a terrible sensation of being alone.

Moran recalls looking at his wife and saying, "I don't know who you are." She thought he was losing his mind.

A brain scan revealed a growth, larger than a golf ball, that looked like a glioblastoma -- an aggressive, fast-growing brain tumor that is almost always fatal. The first [neurosurgeon](#) Moran saw said an operation would not alter the eventual outcome.

Moran came to Anderson for a second opinion. Anderson said the only way to confirm the diagnosis would be to perform an open biopsy.

"Since Mr. Moran was young and otherwise healthy, I suggested that it was too early to give up," Anderson said. "If the other physicians were wrong -- while unlikely -- we might be able to remove the lesion without damage to his intellectual function. I'm thankful that we maintained a sense of hope."

Moran underwent surgery in January 1987. The lesion turned out to be an abscess (bag of fluid) caused by an infection in the brain. Left untreated, it would be fatal in a month or two. Either the abscess would rupture and Moran would die suddenly, or it would continue growing, obstructing brain vessels and compressing the brain stem.

Fortunately, Anderson was able to completely remove the abscess. "We woke him up and told him, 'It's all gone,' " Anderson said.

Moran, who had been preparing to die, was dumbfounded. "It was miraculous," he said. "I went from a very dark night to a very bright

morning."

The near-death experience had a profound effect on Moran's faith. Before the surgery, he said, he was a "mediocre" Catholic. Afterward, he became much more devout. Every day he attends Mass, recites the rosary, studies church teachings and gets on his knees to pray.

"My faith is everything," he said. "And everything stems from my faith."

Through the years, Moran has thought often about the surgeon who saved his life. "Dr. Anderson is part of my life," he said. "I'm very thankful for the work that he does."

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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