

Kennedy has lethal brain tumor (The News Journal) 05.21.08

Oncologist: Patients typically live 1-3 years

From staff and wire reports

WASHINGTON -- Sen.

Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., the liberal icon who has spent more than four decades at the forefront of social change efforts in Congress, has been diagnosed with a cancerous brain tumor, physicians at Boston's Massachusetts General Hospital said Tuesday.

A

biopsy of a portion of Kennedy's brain identified a malignant glioma as the cause of the seizure that hospitalized him Saturday, according to a statement by Lee Schwamm, the hospital's vice chairman of neurology, and Larry Ronan, the 76-year-old's primary-care physician. A glioma is the most common type of brain tumor, accounting for more than half of the 20,000 or so diagnosed each year. The prognosis for patients is poor, according to the National Institutes of Health.

"It

is one of the most lethal cancers you can get," said Dr. Sunjay Shah, a radiation oncologist with Christiana Care Health System. "In general, survival is pretty bleak, typically one to three years. There have been real steps to improving patient survival, but the chance of surviving five years is low."

Seizures

are common in patients who have brain tumors, Shah said. A tumor or mass can cause the brain to swell within the skull, compressing normal brain structures. A seizure can result, which Shah likened to "an electrical storm that runs through the brain."

When

possible, Shah said, surgery is performed to remove as much of the tumor as possible without damaging neurologic processes. But it may not always be an option, depending on the location of the tumor, the patient's overall health and the aggressiveness of the cancer.

Intensive

radiation therapy is standard treatment for gliomas, usually five days a week for six weeks, Shah said. Chemotherapy also is given, usually at the same time, to destroy any tumor cells that are left behind.

Sadness on Capitol Hill

News of the diagnosis swept through the Capitol as Republican and Democratic senators were attending their respective weekly policy lunches. Some senators later wept as they publicly considered the potential mortality of a man who was at the center of nearly half a century of the nation's most important legislative issues.

"He's a strong guy and has great heart, and we're confident he's going to be back here," Sen. Christopher Dodd, D-Conn., Kennedy's closest friend in the Senate, said before his voice broke and tears welled in his eyes.

Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., 90, the chamber's elder statesman and the longest-serving senator in history, wept on the Senate floor. "Ted, Ted, I love you, and I miss you," he said through sobs.

Kennedy's doctors said Tuesday that "he has had no further seizures, remains in good overall condition, and is up and walking around the hospital."

They said they will determine Kennedy's course of treatment after further testing and analysis.

'Grit and determination'

"I'd be reluctant to comment beyond saying that if anybody has the grit and determination to beat this, it is -- and I do think attitude matters in these very, very serious circumstances -- it's Ted Kennedy," Biden said in a statement Tuesday. "Ted has more energy, more passion, more commitment, more knowledge than anybody I've ever worked with in the Senate."

Both Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., and Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., praised Kennedy's legislative skills and wished him and his family well.

Overwhelmed by tributes

Statements poured out of congressional offices, Bush administration suites and from the campaign trail -- expressions of concern for the senator with the third-longest tenure ever and the surviving patriarch of American political royalty.

President

Bush said in a statement that "Ted Kennedy is a man of tremendous courage, remarkable strength, and powerful spirit. Our thoughts are with Senator Kennedy and his family during this difficult period."

Sen.

Barack Obama, D-Ill., hailed by Kennedy as the standard-bearer of the legacies of his fallen brothers, John and Robert Kennedy, said: "He has been there for the American people during some of our country's most trying moments, and now that he's facing his own, I ask all Americans to keep him in our thoughts and prayers,"

Sen.

John McCain of Arizona, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, said, "I have described Ted Kennedy as the last lion in the Senate, and I have held that view because he remains the single most effective member of the Senate."

An aide said that Kennedy watched some of the tributes from his colleagues and was "overwhelmed."

A long career in the Senate

Always a lightning rod for conservatives outside the Capitol, Kennedy's stature in the Senate can hardly be overstated. His fingerprints can be found on landmark legislation on civil rights, bilingual and special education and immigration; on laws that guarantee health care for poor children; and on the composition of the Supreme Court.

He has gone into battle with McCain for tobacco control and a pathway to

citizenship for illegal immigrants, but he has fought fiercely with McCain and other Republicans over war, civil liberties and labor policies.

"We just don't feel like going on. He is the center of the Senate, the heart, mind and soul. Just pray," said Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y.

Kennedy now trails only Byrd and the late Strom Thurmond in years served in the Senate. Last August, he cast his 15,000th vote, something only Byrd and Thurmond had done before him.