



BREAST CANCER

2012 - three years after diagnosis...

My New Life with Breast Cancer

Where to start? It's difficult to put pen to paper, even now some three years after diagnosis. To try earlier on would have been futile, as my brain didn't want to focus for any length of time. Sometimes, even now, I find it hard to think and have blank spots where I forget what I was about to do, or about to say; even ordinary words seem to be buried deep.

Back in July 2009, I found a lump, albeit small, in my breast. A visit to the doctor confirmed that I wasn't imagining it so a referral for mammogram and ultrasound plus a biopsy was organised. Some six weeks later my worst suspicions were confirmed. It was breast cancer. Suddenly, my whole world fell apart, and confusion set in. I had to see a surgeon and two weeks later he operated to remove the lump as well as surrounding tissue and the sentinel lymph node. Everyone said it had been caught early, so there was a good chance of beating the cancer.

Then came the lymphoedema consultant, who checked my levels and gave me a series of exercises to be done every day from then to eternity - to minimise the likelihood of my lymphatic system going AWOL. I have religiously done these exercises, and every day that I do them is a constant reminder of what has happened, and what could happen again in the future.

I was fortunate right from the word go to be linked with a McGrath Foundation Breast Care nurse called Donna. She was so understanding, helpful, reassuring, informative and nothing was too much trouble. Donna was there, just a phone call away, not only for me, but also for Dave, my husband, who was as confused and concerned as I was.

Chemotherapy was the next hurdle which started a month later. This took place at Bunbury Regional Hospital - supposedly every three weeks for six treatments. Well, after the first one, my blood levels had not returned to normal so the next session was delayed for a week, and twenty-four hours after it I had to have an injection in my stomach, which Dave had to do as there is no way that I could, having a definite aversion to needles of any kind. These jabs continued throughout.

I thought I handled the first three visits pretty well. I was fortunate that I didn't have nausea. Then came a change in the chemicals used. Boy did that knock me for six! I arranged an extra visit to the oncologist and was ready to jack it all in - I'd had enough! He told me that there was nothing he could do to relieve the side-effects, however, after having been persuaded to give the next treatment a go, the reactions were not quite as bad, so I persevered. I made it through with the help of my husband and Donna. I must also say that the nursing staff in the oncology ward were exemplary. They too were positive, considerate, caring and efficient. What more could you ask?

Three weeks later, it was up-stakes and move to Perth for six weeks of radiotherapy. This was one session a day, five days a week. I think I handled that an awful lot better. I didn't feel as unwell, just became tired and lethargic. Again the staff were exceptional, the same as they were in Bunbury, and the radiation oncologist was an absolute treasure - his 'bedside manner' would put some of his colleagues to shame.

That was the end of treatment so my husband and I went up north to one of our favourite places for a couple of weeks of doing nothing. It was something which we both needed - *our* time - no

schedules to follow and no appointments to keep. It was magic! We talked about what had happened and where we might go from here. We also wondered how younger women with family commitments manage to cope, especially if they don't have the help and support that I had. My husband, who had retired, was there for me, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week and without him I would not have made it. I was lucky, but what about all the others?

If ever you are unfortunate enough to experience a similar situation, try to keep positive. It can be hard at times, but there are many different areas of support available besides family and friends. Sometimes it is easier to talk to a stranger, where you can say exactly how you feel and what's troubling you without the fear of upsetting anyone or making them feel guilty. You need that help. Whatever is offered, take it.

Having been through what we have, it certainly makes us view life in a totally different way. Life is too short, so I'm not game to make plans for the future. I live for today. Each day I tell myself: this is going to be a good one - enjoy it and make the most of it.

We try to do what we want to do, what we feel like doing, and spend time together. Therefore I've no reason to get down or depressed and start asking - why me? That question has been in my mind so many times, and I still don't know the answer. Then again, maybe I really don't want to know. With a much brighter future ahead now, I don't think I need to know any more.

I have managed to get my life back on track. I've created this website with the help of tutorials on the internet. Okay, it may have taken me over two years and I'm still learning, forever looking for ways to be more creative. Every day I try to achieve something, no matter how small. That way I am progressing, going forward and getting there – wherever *there* may be. I know I will make it.

Focus F23: Book Review of “Take My Hand” by Jo Wiles – the inspiring stories of 14 McGrath Breast Care Nurses.

For information and support assistance:

Australia	Cancer Council Australia	www.cancer.org.au
UK	Cancer Research UK	cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org
USA	American Cancer Society	www.cancer.org/

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