

## **My story**

**By:** Zoé Patrick

### Diagnosis:

I was diagnosed in January 2015 after having an endoscopy at the JR in the New Year.

I had been struggling for some time with persistent heartburn which wouldn't go away however many home remedies I took. I had visited my GP who refused to take it seriously and instead gave me anti-reflux medication (Omeprazole) and insisted that I didn't need an endoscopy because "it's a very uncomfortable procedure and all it will show is a very red oesophagus" (her words not mine). It was only after 3 months and several visits where I refused to be 'fobbed off' that I was eventually successful in convincing her that I needed this test. Interestingly, when she entered my details on the computer a red flag came up for me to have an urgent referral!

Christmas that year with my family was difficult as I was unaware what would come up and my worst fears may be realised.

I had my endoscopy on 5th January 2015 and the clinician who did the test already warned me that she had found a 'suspicious growth' so I needed to be prepared. This was when I realised what I had suspected was right all along. This was followed by a CT scan the following week.

My appointment with the consultant at the Cancer & Haematology Outpatients confirmed that I had squamous cell oesophageal cancer, but initially they would try and remove this using Endoscopic Ultrasound. Unfortunately, this was not possible because they discovered that the 3cm tumour may have extended into one of my lymph nodes. This meant it was marginal, so I was referred back to the surgical team. More biopsies were taken at this point.

I saw one of the surgeons (Bruno Sgromo) who diagnosed T2 N1 early squamous cell cancer and there would be two options to consider which were either Aggressive radio-chemotherapy or an Oesophagectomy operation.

From then on it was whilst under the care of the Churchill team that I realised how fortunate I was to be looked after by this hugely specialist and talented department with first class surgeons and nursing staff. This was a huge relief as from then on, I knew they would have my best interests at heart.

### Treatment:

I had to decide between the chemo-rad treatment (supposedly quick and fast) or to go for the full-blown operation (Tiger of an Operation!) as described by Bruno) However, after discussion with my family it was decided to go for the whole works because I didn't want to fear anything left behind.

I saw the Consultant Oncologist (Dr. Mukharjee) who explained both options and advised that I could have chemo and radiotherapy as a precursor to the operation if I wished as he was currently spearheading some trials on this, however, on reflection it was thought that

this might be over the top in my case, so I just went with the chemotherapy option first. (Now I believe that radiotherapy and chemotherapy are the normal 'go to' treatment before surgery these days). This involved my first day in the Day Treatment area and then I went home with a holster and picc line and the rest of the medication (including anti-sickness pills). It wasn't easy whilst having the chemotherapy because I felt tired and sometimes constipated, but I believe this is the nature of the anti-sickness drugs combined with the chemicals. However, it was lovely to be able to eat properly again once the nausea had passed. I remember Jackie (Founder and Patron of OOSO) telling me that once she had received chemotherapy it was the first time she could eat a banana without gagging. She was right and her description of it 'being a breeze' had kept me going. I then had to go for a 2nd round of chemotherapy (in March) but at least this time I knew what to expect.

Then the day of my surgery was getting closer as I was expected to have a decent break after the round of chemo before an operation was possible (the idea is to shrink the tumour enough to operate). I also had to undergo a PET scan. My surgery date was scheduled for 8th May and my surgeon was allocated (Richard Gillies). I had to undergo a pre-op assessment (for my fitness) and when I saw my surgeon he was pleased that all seemed to be well, and he would see me just before my planned surgery date on 8th May. I had to spend the first 24 hours in the ICU. He explained that the operation he would undertake was called the Ivor-Lewis technique (named after the surgeon of that name). This meant cutting across my stomach and then accessing my oesophagus through my ribs on the right-hand side. The tumour would be removed as well as any lymph nodes necessary and then the stomach would be pulled up to meet my throat joining up to make for a new oesophagus. Fortunately, I had read this up beforehand so that I was aware that it was quite a big procedure and likened to heart surgery.

Once I was in hospital, I was taken care of on the ward, and although there were a few complications in my particular case which meant that I had to stay in hospital longer than expected, I won't detail them here because everyone is different and we have to make the most of what we have. I was fortunate to have received an early diagnosis. Also I did not have to wait months for treatment and my operation. (It was 5 months from my endoscopy to surgery, with chemotherapy taking place beforehand during March and April). I was discharged once I was ready to go home with support from my husband and family.

#### Work commitments:

I was elected as an Oxfordshire County Councillor in 2001, so I continued to work in that role throughout my illness. I took 6 months out during my treatment and surgery but then went straight back to my duties. I had been my group's (Liberal Democrat) leader right up until diagnosis and was also due to become Vice Chairman of the Council that year (2016). (This role is shared amongst political parties as a tradition at Oxfordshire County Council and this still continues. I also managed to attend the Queen's Jubilee Garden Party that May which was a real honour and was just one year after my surgery). Considering I had been advised by my surgeon that it would take approximately 2 years to recover that wasn't bad going! I was put on the ERAS programme (rapid recovery). It was my turn to become Chairman of the Council the following year, so I was determined to continue with this role too. However,

that meant another election to get through (elections at councils are usually every 4 years). So that was my next task!

Fortunately, I was well known in my division of Grove and Wantage in Oxfordshire, and everyone was pleased that I was recovered and able to represent them. I was re-elected to the County Council for what would be my 5th term of office. It was then a great honour to become Chairman of Oxfordshire County Council and attend 168 events all over the county of Oxfordshire including hosting a Charity Dinner. Rob Dennis provided the food from the Oxfordshire Guild of Chefs and it was a wonderful occasion where Jackie and Roger were seated with me at the 'top table'.



I retired from the Council the following year when we moved down to Lyme Regis in Dorset, which was a part of the world we had visited before on holiday and was close to the sea but not too far from my family and grandchildren. Now we can have them come to stay during their school holidays.

Since then, I have made the most of my time down here, sea swimming, walking, singing with a local choir, watercolour painting and travelling. Our most recent epic voyage was across the world to Tokyo visiting some areas in Japan and then across the Pacific Ocean to do an amazing trip to Alaska and Glacier Bay. We crossed the Pacific Date Line which meant we lived 31st May twice! (However, I lost half of my birthday flying over to Tokyo in the other direction on 22nd May).

We were cruising on the Queen Elizabeth and were able to get up close to many of the glaciers in the bay.



Rangers came on board to explain the ecology and wildlife (you are not allowed to dock anywhere in the bay) and we had views of sea otters, sea lions and whales along the journey. After cruising several beautiful ports in Alaska, we ended up finally in Vancouver. Here we stayed for another 3 days under our own steam before flying back home.

What my illness and recovery have taught me is that you need a positive attitude, caring help and advice and a determination to continue. My father and sister had both sadly died from cancer, but in my father's case it had been a case of denial, and he hadn't had treatment early. I learnt that there was sadly no benefit in waiting for cancer, taking up the challenge to beat it was what I had in mind.

It is now 10 years since the illness and for as long as I can, I shall continue to make the most of what I have. Life has to be what you make it, and with the wonderful support of a charity such as OOSO and all the medical staff at the Churchill Hospital who want to see you get well, you should always be able to receive the help you need. They want you on the road to recovery and the rest is up to you.