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***The Phoenix Rises***

Imagine the feeling just after Christmas 2016 when I felt a lump in my left breast. Ahhhhhhhhhhhh.

The message from the media is to get these matters checked out ASAP.

I was referred to the Breast unit at Broomfield Hospital and had an ultra sound and biopsy in March 2017. The early indication was that I had a “malignancy which would need treatment”. Despite the absolute professionalism and kindness from the Biopsy team tears did follow; given the “shock” as I had hoped it was just a cyst or fatty tissue (in my dreams). I was subsequently called in to see the Breast unit surgeon. She was very kind and looked me directly in the eye and told me I did not have Breast cancer. Phew! I was however to be referred to the Haematology department at Broomfield Hospital. In early April 2017 I was called to meet with the Consultant there. He said a letter with biopsy results indicated that I had a lymphoma. He and his team would investigate and tests followed. The Haematology department was great, everyone from the nurses, doctors to consultants. They were extremely Professional, knowledgeable and practical individuals. Kind and considerate when going the extra mile was called for.

Ultimately, I was diagnosed with “Small Lymphatic Lymphoma” (SLL) a cancer that affects a type of white blood cell called a "lymphocyte," they help your body fight infection. It is a form of **Leukaemia**.

My consultant placed me on **“Watch and Wait”** as this is usually a slow growing chronic condition. In my case, as can happen, my body did not get that memo and the lymphoma quickly developed such that on 12 October 2017, I commenced a course of treatment called “FCR” Chemotherapy. For me, this involved a day of intravenous treatment followed by 6 days of Chemo in tablet form at home. Very challenging due to side effects (numerous – yes I seem to have experienced most of them). The following week I was as weak as a kitten, then a little stronger with essentially one good week at the end of the 28 day cycle.

Chemo nurses: are angels on legs.

Luckily my Partner Robin has been an absolute STAR /Etoile with so much backup from friends, family and neighbours, former and new.

I have now completed the 6 month course of treatment, my last session finished at the end of March 2018. A three month recovery period is now to follow. On 20th April 2018, a year since diagnosis, I got the “all clear” from my Consultant. The most amazing news!!

***The Phoenix rise to see many another day(s) ……………***

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**What observations can I share that may be of use to fellow sufferers:-**

Listening is really important, hearing what they/you have to say and engaging with you to resolve issues.

Keep your own Chemo diary:with brief, albeit scribbled, notes on your side effects and generally how you felt as you progressed with your treatment. It is so very useful when you talk to the doctors.

Take time to talk to health professionals: all about the side effects so that they may consider the best way forward. This may be changing the combination of drugs, pain killers or recommending timings e.g. taking anti- sickness drugs an hour before food. Don’t be shy. I was initially but soon learned to speak up.

Helen Rollason Charity provided reflexology during my first few Chemo sessions at hospital designed to reduce anxiety. Wonderful and very much appreciated. They offer treatments at other times to for Cancer patients.

Macmillan’s Cancer Charity was magic; support/ listening at their POD in the hospital, form filling in, numerous useful leaflets, and a cook book especially for cancer sufferers from initial treatment through to recovery. **Brilliant!**

Risk management is important. There is a distinct risk of infection as the Chemo removes your immune systems effectiveness. Whilst given preventative drugs, I chose the exclusion method and stayed home as much as possible with only trips to hospital and coffee shops or occasionally restaurants. Visitors were limited to a special few and no-one came near with a bad cold/flu. Friends would contact me by phone, with no risk of germs there and the ladies in the village soon picked up on leaving me while I had the actual treatment and 10 days later would call to see how I was and discuss goings on in the village. **Perfect for me.**

Hair is an important part of any woman’s self-belief. The FCR treatment leads to hair thinning, rather than complete hair loss, hence it is great to find a sympathetic Hairdresser to cut it. I chose a **“Pixie cut”** look and have been complimented on it so may keep it like this. If it’s good enough for Katy Perry …….haha x.

Also, where grey hair shows through and the hair becomes extremely dry /coarse during Chemo treatment, one is not recommended to treat the hair. I was fortunate in that one of the Chemo nurses had in a past life been a Hairdresser and advised me that you can colour your hair but only with semi-permanent treatment and no harsh chemicals. Amazingly, I found a hairdresser that operates a 100% organic colour system that is perfect for gently treating hair. (Call for more info - Leasa 077534629 or 01277 822441, mention ORGANIC) I had the colour treatment in my good week which gave me back some part of my womanly self-respect. When I did have to go out I felt a little bit normal. Quite an achievement given your entire “terms of reference” in relating to the wider world is completely turned upside down during Chemo.

Food and drink can be very challenging.

The metallic taste in your mouth and nose is hard to live with and grows as the treatment continues. Rossi’s Lemon sorbet ice cream takes the taste away, sadly as soon as you stop eating the ice cream it comes back; don’t stop then haha ☺

I found drinking fizzy drinks the only option, coca cola, tonic water, orange fizz. I could not face milky drinks or tea/coffee at all. As my taste buds vanished I have found cravings for mature cedar cheese and prawns (Jacket potatoes good for quick energy after treatment). Bread is too stodgy hence crackers a great substitute.

At each treatment session lasting 7 days in all, I lost between 5 and 6 kilograms. This weight, I was determined, had to be gained back so that the doctors could agree me to go forward to the next session. This I achieved each time ☺