

Teresa was diagnosed with cancer in September 2013. Her husband supported her through all her treatment. He has kindly taken the time to share their experiences, and we hope that this will be of help to others facing a similar diagnosis.

'Having cancer isn't good news, but it doesn't mean that you should just give up. Once upon a time maybe but not anymore'.

THE BEGINNING

Teresa's story begins one Wednesday in September last year, (2013). Ever since we have lived in Cyprus we have kept Wednesday as a day off, meaning that we do nothing at all except lie in the sunshine with our cats, have lunch and maybe a beer or two. Everyone we know knows not to bother us on a Wednesday. This particular Wednesday was different. Teresa woke up with a pain in her side. Two paracetamol and two cups of tea later it hadn't really subsided. Neither of us was worried at this stage, thinking perhaps that she had just slept awkwardly. Teresa is slim, very fit, and a noted marathon runner with a cupboard full of trophies from just about every race of note in the UK. Twelve times a London Marathon runner, usually starting with the elite runners. If we are not well, we usually go for a run, and that cures many things.

It was decided that I would go up the garden to lie in the sun and sort out the cats, (who also expect a life of luxury and lots of treats on our day off), whilst Teresa would stay in bed and wait for the ache to go. She normally has a very high tolerance of pain, but by late afternoon she really couldn't take it anymore and we were beginning to think about an appendix problem. So, off we went to Kamiloglu Hospital in Girne (Kyrenia Medical Centre). We had used it before for minor problems and had no problems with their doctors and procedures, realistic costs too. Within 5 minutes of arriving at the hospital Teresa had had an ultrasound scan, and then a second in more depth, and a blood test. Within an hour a growth was confirmed in her abdomen, which needed a CT scan to fully resolve (CT scan - a computerised tomography (**CT**) **scan**, also known as a **CAT scan**, uses X-rays and a computer to create detailed images of the inside of the body). This had to wait until the next morning because Teresa had to drink a special solution over several hours beforehand. Neither of us was very happy that evening, although a few bottles of wine helped us along.

The next day the CT scan showed everything in more detail, a 15cm tumour on her right ovary. The hospital was worried about it and, of course so were we. They explained that they couldn't tell whether it was malignant or not, but whichever way it had to come out in case it burst. They immediately started to assemble a surgical team. Teresa had an ECG, more blood tests, which was confirmed as good for the operation and that afternoon they knocked her out and began to operate. They had a 'frozen section' pathologist in the surgery with them and her results determined the extent of the operation. By 10.30 that night they knew the whole story and so did I. Malignant. Six and a half hours of surgery completed a full 'debunk', (a medical term relating to removing everything that looked or tested as cancerous). Ovaries, uterus, appendix, gall bladder, part of her bladder and several lymph nodes all removed.

The next morning I had to break the news to Teresa. Cancer! The only good news was that it hadn't got into her circulatory system and was confined to the abdomen. The surgeons were sure that they had removed everything that

was visible but chemotherapy would be needed, as a standard precaution, in case anything was missed.

Teresa spent 10 days recovering in hospital, and word soon got out. Friends rallied around, visiting her, making sure that I had meals to eat, (even though I am perfectly capable of microwaving spaghetti hoops), and helping me feed all the cats. I got many lectures on how I had to stay strong for Teresa, which didn't work. On day two Teresa showed me her tubes and needles, loads of them wired into her, and I promptly fainted twice. So, 16 hours after surgery she is using her buzzer to call the nurses out to me!

One of Teresa's friends mentioned Tulips and a friend made the initial enquiry, and this resulted in Jane Matter, one of two Tulips cancer support workers who supports patients on the western side of Girne, visiting us.

Teresa was home by now and the hospital had arranged appointments with an Oncology Doctor (Doctor Ozlem, who controls all of the treatment wherever you are treated, whether it be at the Oncology units at Near East and the State hospital in Lefkoşa). As soon as we knew the approximate course of action and the proposed prescription drugs, we passed this onto Jane. The Tulips staff were brilliant removing the need for us to try and collect the drugs ourselves from the State Pharmacy in Lefkosa. Tulips arranged for the collection of the drugs and the subsequent delivery to whichever hospital we were using. Because Teresa had an abdominal port fitted, we actually used Near East and the State hospital for the first treatment, because the abdominal port was something of a novelty here, rarely seen before.

In between treatments and consultations I was learning new skills, such as how the washing machine worked, the settings on the dishwasher, where the mop bucket is kept etc.

Teresa's second chemotherapy session seriously depleted her white blood cells. She almost collapsed, I got her back into Kamiloglu hospital, they contacted the Oncology doctor in Lefkoşa and a new prescription drug and a series of injections, was prescribed. The injections worked superbly well, basically they saved Teresa's life. and Tulips, bless them helped this happen without any hassle. In a nutshell, Tulips helped to save her life.

It's hard to see how Tulips could have been more helpful. The support workers have streamlined several of the necessary processes, to take the strain off the patient. They are always available, at any time, to offer advice or help, they order, collect and deliver drugs to where you need them. Tulips maintain the Oncology unit and its staff in the State hospital and they work hard to raise funds to finance all of this as they receive no other funding. To them, everyone is an individual and needs to be cared for. Short of helping me to paint the outside of the house, I can't see what else they can do. Even though everything in Cyprus changes every other day, they are working to standardise procedures and put together a definitive guide to what to do next.

Chemotherapy has a lot of bad news associated with it. It doesn't get a good press with side effects including hair loss, sickness, pain, impaired mental abilities, risks of disease or infection, loss of motor function, death; the reputation is so bad that some people elect not to take it. That is just crazy. Although there are some unpleasant side effects, these can be controlled by modern medicine. I'm not saying that it is a pleasant experience, but it is a lot

better than the alternative. Chemotherapy isn't like it was 10 years ago, or even 5 years ago. New discoveries and treatments continually appear. Somehow it needs to be rebranded.

Teresa experienced hair loss, (but it will grow back, and not everyone gets this problem), and some days she hurt and just needed to rest. Low white cell counts are easily countered nowadays with the injections. But her attitude was good, and attitude is everything, almost as important as the treatment itself. If she was tired, she would take a nap. If she ached, she would lie down and watch TV or use her iPad. If a job needed doing, it waited until tomorrow. If she could do it, she would, but if not, then it would wait. Her chemo treatments happened to be on a Thursday, and often she felt low on the following Saturday and Sunday. By Monday she was her usual self. Her sessions were split into 2 parts, one week apart, and after the second part she knew she would feel low for a couple of days but then she had nearly two weeks of quite normal life. But she did rest a lot because it helped her to recover. It was always scary waiting for the results of the quite frequent blood tests. At the half way point in her treatment she needed another medical examination and a CT scan, also scary, but we had known about that right from the beginning so really it was just another part of the treatment.

The procedures in the hospital are fairly straightforward (but sometimes quite time-consuming and occasionally infuriating) once you have registered with them and a file has been opened containing your medical history. After that it's really just a case of turning up early, booking yourself in with Şerife (a lady who works on the top floor of the Oncology Unit at the Reception desk), having the results of your latest blood test analysed by a doctor and then having the treatment. This procedure can vary in time from two to six hours so take a book to read.

If Tulips are on your side then all the hard work has been taken away from you. Şerife is also your key figure in the Oncology unit ... if you have any queries or problems then take them to Şerife, anything at all, and she will deal with it. I don't know all of the details of Tulips involvement with the Oncology unit, but it is fair to say that if it wasn't for their sponsorship then the unit would be far less effective.



Anyway, Teresa continued to receive her chemo treatments. It did affect our life style; it would be silly to say otherwise. For example, it affected our social life, partly because Teresa was too tired for half of the week, partly because she didn't want to go out after suffering the hair loss, and partly because neither of us knew what the final outcome would be and it is hard to be jolly when we were both considering, (but often unsaid even between ourselves), the worst scenario and what might happen then. We both learned new skills ... I know the price of every item in every supermarket within 10 kilometres, which end of the mop goes into the bucket, where to buy dishwasher tablets at the best price, and Teresa knows more about Kindles and Tablets than I will ever know. She is also more aware of her body's needs nutritionally and designs meals accordingly.

We both know exactly how things work both at the Near East hospital and the State Hospital. Both have their own systems in place and it is worth getting to know them as soon as you can. It will save a lot of time and hassle. For example, at the Near East make sure you always have an official form of identification with you, because they will want to take it off you and hold it until you pay them, when they will return it. No ID causes no end of problems. And always ask them for a photocopy of whatever notes they have made that day, then you have them if someone asks. Carry all of your notes with you at all times wherever you go. At the State Hospital, wander around and find out what really happens .. ask and talk to people. We had to get an extra blood test on one of the days of chemo in the State Hospital for some reason. No problem there, they took the blood and told us we would have to wait for two hours for the results, (a courier has to collect the sample, take it to the lab, return it to the oncology unit etc). We found out that if you take the sample to the lab yourselves, (it's 50 metres away), you can have the results in 15 minutes and can therefore proceed to chemo much, much more quickly. And we found this amazing shortcut how? By talking to other patients! In short, carry some ID, get copies of any notes that are made, and talk to the people around you, even if it is only in 'Turkish'. And after every treatment make contact with Tulips and tell them what went well and what perhaps didn't go quite so well. They will help you.

Our life together quickly sorted itself out around our new routines. Up at 6am on chemo days, in the hospital by 7.30, (early I know, but any later and there are tremendous traffic problems at the big Lefkoşa roundabout. We would rather sit in the hospital with a cup of tea than sit in a half-mile traffic jam at the roundabout). Register with Şerife, see the Oncologist, go through the treatment, collect the white cell injections, drive home and shop. Prepare for a couple of days of not much happening whilst Teresa crashed out, mark on the calendar when the next intake of chemotherapy-antisickness-pills were required and then have a relatively normal existence until the next chemotherapy session came around, remembering to contact Tulips and let them know so that drugs would be in place. This may all sound rather boring and mundane but is was not without its scary moments. We were both always worried when it came to collecting the results of the blood tests, (a new blood test is required before every chemo session), and we were scared silly when Teresa had to have a new ct scan at the halfway point of the treatment and another at the end of the treatment, (just standard practice to let the Oncologists know what is going on inside). Nevertheless, the 2 hours between a CT scan being performed and the results with a written report being available are nerve wracking.

Finally the last chemo treatment was over. The half way CT scan showed no problems, but we now had to wait a month before the final CT scan, and the final cancer-marker blood

test, to give Teresa a chance to get over the chemo effects. It was a long month. One week into it, her abdominal port began to play up. It turned out that her body had decided to reject it, so it had to be removed under anaesthetic. That operation went well, apart from a couple of new scars, and then the day of the CT scan arrived. The scan itself was easy, but the report was in Turkish but no one in the hospital where we had it performed wanted to comment on the results. When Teresa is both angry and scared though, it is wise to tell her what she wants to know. Eventually the hospital, after repeatedly telling us to take the report to the Oncologist, translated the report for us. They had found what they called a 'thickening' in her lower right abdomen, and they were frightened to tell us. To this day they don't understand why we both started to grin and laugh, and jump for joy. You see, we knew what they didn't ... the thickening was simply scar tissue left over from Teresa's attempt to reject the port. The surgeon who removed her port had, of course, been inside her and looked. A little later the Oncologist confirmed this, and pointed out that Teresa had no signs in her chest cavity of the cancer having spread, no signs of it in her abdominal cavity, and the blood test showed no trace of any further tumours, (later confirmed by our vet who uses a similar test on animals).

We were over the moon. We took in a special cake to the staff at the hospital where she was treated and gave everyone we knew there a lottery ticket giving them the chance to win 50,000 TL, (but as far as we know no one did). A routine check up appointment was arranged for 3 months time, no CT scan or blood test required, and now we had to start thinking about a full recovery.

Most of that happened in late February and early March 2014. At the time of writing we have had the best results that we could wish for. Teresa grows stronger every day, although she still rests often, and her hair has started to grow again. Life is slowly returning to normal. We still have some contact with Tulips, to whom we owe a debt of gratitude that we will probably never be able to repay. We have started to look at ways we can become involved in their fundraising efforts, and if you have read to the end of this, we hope you will consider doing so also. They perform an excellent, and more importantly, a life-saving role. Support their events, and help them in any way that you can.

When I started to write this Teresa was still undergoing chemotherapy. Thankfully it is now all over. Like many medical procedures it isn't something that you would look forwards to, but it isn't a painful procedure as such. OK, it has some side effects that perhaps you don't like the sound of, (hair loss, tiredness, vulnerability to infection etc), but the positive side of it cannot be stressed enough. If it works, (and research centres all over the world are doing their best to make sure that it does), YOU LIVE!

There are hundreds of internet sites that talk about cancer and how many people it kills a year, but I have never found a site that tells you how many people have cancer and survive! Nor have I found a site that puts cancer fatalities into a modern context, by comparing the fatalities with the number of fatalities from, say, heart disease or traffic accidents. I don't know who could do it, but someone needs to dispel the myth that cancer is an automatic death sentence.

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