

A Patient's Experience of Cancer Treatment Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma

My Wonderful Cancer Treatment in the TRNC by G.S.

I guess everyone's experience with cancer is different. This is my tale of how I found out I had cancer and how we, and I do mean we because cancer not only affects the person diagnosed it affects all the loved ones, got through the diagnosis & treatment.

February 2016 - its cold and not time for lazing around the pool or on the beach. We got a message to say the Kolan hospital was offering a full health check at a special rate, so despite being a bloke who thought he was invincible, I was persuaded by my wife to go and have this 'MOT'. I came through this unscathed and with a clean bill of health (well as clean as its gets for an old retired git!). The nurse noticed some lumps on my neck and said you ought to have these checked, At this stage I was convinced they were cysts but again the nurse persuaded me to undergo a quick procedure to check to cut a long story short, one small op under local anaesthetic by Dr Küçük (a general surgeon) and the lumps were out and being sent off for tests. 3 days later I visited Dr Küçük to receive the news that they were in fact cancerous. He continued by saying I now needed to see an cancer specialist and recommended Dr Dilek Yazman. He even telephoned her and arranged an appointment for me with her.

A few days later I attended her clinic and we went through the biopsy results. She confirmed it was a particular type of cancer called lymphoma, but needed more tests on the lumps to ascertain exactly which variant. She also suggested a CT scan and a bone marrow test to further determine the extent of the cancer in my body.

In the usual efficient style of medical care here in the TRNC she made me a second appointment with her for a few days later and carried out the bone marrow test at that visit, gave me the extracted marrow in a test tube and told me where to take it and what tests to have done on it. She told me I could have the CT scan done at the Kolan (or any other private hospital) or have it done at the Lefkosa state Hospital.

So far so good, here we were in a foreign land not really speaking much Turkish - (yes we can get by with the usual pleasantries and very basic conversation, but we were certainly nowhere near competent enough to discuss anything in depth) - but had managed to steer our way to the initial diagnosis and get an appointment with a cancer specialist. We sat and had a coffee and decided maybe it was a good time to contact Tulips as we were getting out of our depth. Our initial chat, over the phone was very helpful in telling us what we could do and how Tulips could help. We agreed that until we knew the full extent we would keep going on our own and refer back when we had more detail. Already we could see the potential help available

and it certainly reduced the stress levels knowing there was someone out there saying 'We're here if you need us'

I opted to use the State hospital for the scan which was booked for about 1 week after my visit to Dr Yazman. 4 days later I picked up the scan results and collected the bone marrow results from the testing laboratory and armed with this info returned to see Dr Yazman.

Now we found out the extent of the cancer and how far it had spread through my body we had reached decision time and discussed the various options with her. This varied from

- a) No treatment
- b) Treatment in a private hospital using their doctors and drugs prescribed by Dr Yazman
- c) Treatment at Lefkosa State Hospital with Dr Yazman as the consultant

She suggested we went away and decided together how we would proceed. She then suggested we contact 'Helping Those With Cancer Association', It took us a few minutes to realise that she was talking about 'Tulips' (as we know it), as she thought we would find them helpful, positive and supportive. We explained that we already had had an initial chat but now was a good time to explore in more detail.

As you can imagine by this stage we were getting a little punch drunk with all information being given to us and all the decisions we were going to have to make. Add to that we don't speak Turkish and all the paperwork and forms tend to be in Turkish left us feeling a little lost wondering how we might steer our way through this.

We contacted Jayne Matter who manages West of Kyrenia Expat Patient Liason and arranged to meet. She was absolutely superb explaining the options available here in the TRNC or that we may consider returning to the UK for treatment. My wife and I had already decided that we would stay here for treatment, after all it is our home now, so we narrowed the choice down to using the state hospital. Jayne went through the levels of support Tulips are able to offer and we chose to register and take up the option of support and guidance.

Some of the other decisions we made were;

- a) Life was to carry on as normal as possible within the home, no fuss etc.
- b) As my immune system was going to take a battering we told our friends who called not to call if they had any cold / sniffle / etc
- c) I would avoid going out in the sun, and I love the sun!
- d) I would virtually stop having sugar (sugar feeds cancer as I found out!) so Pepsi, my favourite drink, was no longer kept in the home.
- e) I was told to eat lots of broccoli and spinach I hate both! But I did agree to eat broccoli at least 5 days a week, my wife cooked this all through summer as part of a daily main meal despite temperatures of 50 deg C in the kitchen, she was marvellous - must have done its job as I never succumbed to any illness during treatment.

I have to say they were the best decisions we ever made, especially the choice of Tulips support. I cannot thank Tulips enough. They organised the start date for treatment, the chemotherapy drugs I was prescribed and arranged for a Tulips representative to meet us at the hospital. As you can imagine that first visit was very stressful, what with not knowing where to go, not knowing who to see and not knowing what the procedure was for administering the chemo drugs it all added up to a big worry for both of us. This lady that met us was Seda Avcan and she too was brilliant. She patiently and clearly showed us where to go, what to do and what would happen next time and to cap it all it was all in English. I have to say it was as stress free as such an event can be.

We were given the prescriptions for both the post chemo drugs and the next session of chemo. Seda explained who we were to give the prescription to in Tulips and they would organise the delivery of the drugs for the date of the second visit - again a big stress removed as we had no idea where to go to get the drugs - we were then shown where to go to get the post chemo drugs that I needed to take. Finally she showed us where we had to visit for blood tests just prior to each chemo session

Now we knew where to go, what to do and who to see we felt so much more confident. I am sure all this support and warmth added to my positivity and helped us beat my cancer.

After every session Jayne visited to check we were ok, collect the money for the chemo drugs and generally chat and be positive. We both looked forward to Jayne's visits as she was always smiling and positive. I think she liked visiting too as we always got biscuits for her to nibble with her cup of tea!

Now all that remained was for me to complete the treatment, with a CT scan at the mid point to check progress and again at the end to check I was clear. It all became rather routine for us with regular chemo sessions. I am sure it would never have been as easy if it were not for Tulips.

I started this story by deliberately using we and not I as for anyone undergoing cancer treatment the support of your husband or wife is vital. It is easy for the patient to get self absorbed and forget that those close to you will no doubt be suffering a lot too. For me this was never more clearly apparent than when we went for the mid treatment consultation with Dr Yazman and she gave us very positive news and upon hearing that my wife burst into tears of happiness. For me it was seminal moment as I really hadn't realised the depth of her worry which she had kept hidden for fear it might topple my positivity. I was always very positive through this and fully believed that with the right diet (which changed a lot as I found out more about food and its impact on the body), love from my wife combined with a positive mental attitude I would see this off so far so good. Just remember those close to you will be going through their own hell and so support is needed both ways.

To close my tale, I must say that the state oncology unit hospital staff have been excellent, efficient and very compassionate. I could not have asked for better. There are many other Tulips people that we have come across, too numerous to mention, but a special thanks also needs to go to Sue Tilt who was always at the end of a phone when I wanted to ask about things that happen through the chemo, for

example hair loss. She has been great, it probably helped that we have known Sue for a few years from all her tireless Tulips fundraising without which I, along with hundreds of other cancer sufferers, would not have benefitted from treatment at the state hospital oncology unit as Tulips fund the wages of the nurses and support staff.

A short paragraph written by my wife which describes the support provided by Tulips.....

"Husbands or wives or partners greatly benefit from being able to talk to a Tulips Representative, in our case Jayne Matter. Especially when they are having a negative day and don't wish to pass on these feelings to the patient so for me, there was Jayne at the end of a phone to chat about how I was feeling and she even used to offer to meet me if I wanted. Knowing there was someone there for support for me as a partner really really helped and allowed me to remain positive, thank you".