

Breast Cancer

by Maggie Coulthard

There must be almost as many different experiences of breast cancer as there are women who've had it. However, the start is probably similar for many. You know it's serious when the doctor doing the mammography finds something and says her first appointment for a biopsy is next Wednesday morning. There's no room to say you'll be busy getting ready for a big meeting later that day, and so you start on a journey which others have described as going through a tunnel of unknown length with a light at the end.

Well, I guess I've found myself in the light at the end in an unusually short time. A mastectomy with the all-important removal of the lymph nodes took place three weeks after my initial (routine, but three months late) mammography, and a week after that we knew that the lymph nodes were all negative and unaffected by the cancer. So this case is unbelievably straightforward, with Tamoxifen/Nolvadex as the only follow-on treatment. I had a month off work to recover from surgery, another month working part-time, the Christmas break and then a visit to the doctor with blood test results in January, when he said he wouldn't need to see me again till October.

Not surprisingly, I feel I've got off lightly and there's still a big chunk of my brain which hasn't acknowledged I've had cancer. The big lesson in all of this, though, is that everyone is different. There are different degrees of seriousness of the cancer and different kinds of breast cancer which need radiotherapy or chemo or maybe both or neither, and other kinds of breast cancers with no medication afterwards as they are not hormonally triggered. I have to take my Tamoxifen daily for five years – my talisman against a recurrence in the other breast. Just after my surgery, I spoke to one woman who took it for ten years instead of five. At the start of my journey I couldn't understand why anyone would do that. Now I know that keeping the fear at bay is as important as any medical protection.

Alan Bennett's book "Untold Stories" includes a chapter on his diagnosis, treatment and aftermath, including survival way beyond the prognosis he was given at the time. Jenni Murray (of BBC Woman's Hour fame) also wrote about her experience in "Memoirs of a Not So Dutiful Daughter". It's an emotional book, but very funny too. For anyone faced with the diagnosis, the accounts of others and the survival stories are things to devour! My colleague's account of her Mum's treatments at ages 50, 57 and then 80 was a great boost! She taught badminton well into her seventies and so remained very fit and active through it all. Thank you to all the friends who told me about the women they know who had their treatments 15, 20 or more years ago!

Now, I have to mention the guilt! There seems to be a fairly universal reaction at the outset. "What did I do wrong?" I was shocked at my diagnosis, as I'd had no family history of breast cancer, had breastfed my child, and thought I was

reasonably healthy. You have to listen to the practitioners and experts who say "We don't know why it happens" in some cases, or you'll go mad! At this end of the tunnel, there's a new guilt... "Shouldn't I now be living a lifestyle which is 150% healthy?" "Why hasn't this diagnosis made me into a 'better person' who truly does value every precious second?" Well, I think the answer is that some people may indeed be transformed in that way, but many of us still battle with the usual weaknesses for unhealthy food, wine, and too little exercise. The last one – exercise – seems to be crucial in protection against recurrence and at least one study in the US has just begun to focus on the impact of exercise in people who have had cancer. Many women who've been through diagnosis and treatment certainly recommend it strongly as a way of minimising the effects of radiotherapy and chemotherapy and of keeping a positive outlook. I guess also it's a way of proving to yourself that your body is doing pretty well and can still perform... For my part, I'll be getting my bike back on the road again to recover the muscle tone which disappeared while I was recovering from the operation and during the snowy weeks.

Who knows what the future will bring? I do know that one of the most reassuring things during the last few months has been the number of relative strangers (friends of friends) in Brussels and beyond who are prepared to tell you their experiences, so you know there's a network out there and you find out your various experiences are "normal". So many women, with different experiences, different fears which diminish and then flare up again, different triumphs, and all survivors. As Alan Bennett says at the end of the chapter on his diagnosis and treatment, "Take heart!"

... and make sure you, and every woman you know, are up to date with your mammography examinations!

What to tell kids...

I can't advise, as everyone is different, but my son asked a lot of questions (the first being "what colour is the ball?" (i.e. lump), so when I went for the second biopsy (I had two lumps), I asked the doctor. Answer - white for the cancerous tissue itself and red because of the blood supply. My son came with my husband the day before the surgery, as we felt that his first impression of the hospital should be seeing me there in a good state. We all said goodbye to my breast (after all, it had fed him for the first months of his life). I used a metaphor to reassure him, as I had with me a photo of a beautiful tree we'd seen on our summer holiday. It had carried on growing healthily after losing one of the main branches, and I told him that I would carry on being healthy just as the tree had done after it lost something. From then on we answered his questions as factually as we could, and he saw the dressing, then the scar, then the prosthesis. The toughest time was the week or ten days after I came home, when we were all exhausted and he was out of his routine and more prone to tantrums than usual. Maybe there was the effect of my getting more attention than him for a while, and who knows what else! I know that one day he had a conversation with friends at school quite soon after the surgery, when I still had a drain in for the fluid from the scar (mostly lymph fluid, but with some blood, so very bright red). I was worried he might have been too graphic, but I didn't have any complaints or anxious calls from other parents. Also important – I told his teacher so that she could deal with anything that came up in the class, either from kids' questions or from my son's behaviour. Nothing did arise, but I'm still glad I told her, just in case.

Sources of information and support

The Internet – but a big word of caution...

A breast cancer diagnosis is a traumatic event. Some women want to find out as much as they can about it. Going on the Internet and keying in 'Breast Cancer' will put anyone at risk of confusion and information overload at the least, or gloom and despondency at the worst. Don't do it! The websites listed below were supplied by friends and contacts who did the sifting before passing them on. If you want information on something specific, ask someone you trust to do the searching for you and to give you only the essential information. Friends will offer to help – often you and they don't know how they can at the outset. Give this task to one of those people! For when you do feel up to checking out information for yourself, try these two sites which include considerable factual information:

<http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk>

<http://www.breastcancer.org>

The sources of information below are all possible complements to professional medical treatment, which will be the first and most important kind of care for anyone who has a diagnosis of breast cancer. The speed with which the Belgian health services intervene after diagnosis is very impressive, so being resident here gives anyone a great start on the path through to successful treatment.

Support organizations in Brussels:

Cancerhelp 02 375 23 20 – English-language cancer volunteer support organisation. Will arrange to visit you depending on availability, and available to talk on the phone.

Vivre Comme Avant 02 649 41 68 – Francophone cancer support organisation. Will often organize visits to hospital and their network includes English-speakers.

Other useful sources of support:

A BBC Radio 4 Programme called '**Metaphors for Healing**' in October 2009 (great on positive approaches to illness and treatment) included an interview with Jan Alcoe. She has been through difficult cancer treatments and is now a registered hypnotherapist practising in Brighton. She has produced an excellent booklet and two-CD set full of relaxations, visualisations, meditations and other tracks on reflection, listening, creativity and play - helpful for anyone undergoing treatments for serious illness or dealing with a chronic condition. Called '**Lifting your Spirits**', it is available from the Janki Foundation in the UK (www.jankifoundation.org). I would recommend it highly. If you are inclined to lie awake fretting in the night, there is another useful book called '**The Emotional Energy Factor**', by Mira Kirshenbaum, full of specific things to do when negative thoughts threaten! Each time I get it out it's helpful.

Complementary treatments are promoted by www.healthcreation.co.uk, run by Dr Rosy Daniel, formerly head of the Bristol Hospital Cancer Department.

In Brussels...

Carol Lam (lamdm@attglobal.net) runs a cancer support group and recommends her homeopathic doctor/counsellor, Sonia Doyle, on rue Albertyn near Georges-Henri (WSL), tel. 02 736 38 98. She also recommends nutritionist Carolyn Moody. See <http://www.bodybalancehealth.eu/> for contact details (Carolyn has also written pieces for *Small talk*.)

Other alternative treatments are available around Brussels, from massage to acupuncture to reiki. Practitioners are listed in the booklet called **Agenda**, available in health food stores. If you have someone giving a positive recommendation of a particular practitioner, then all the better. See the website <http://www.mieux-etre.be> for a regular e-newsletter about upcoming courses.

For other information on **breast cancer awareness** or on the **science**, here are some pages with browsable selections. The Baltimore Sun put together web pages for breast cancer awareness month in October 2009. There are also links here to the New York Times and the New Scientist.

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/health/breastcancer/>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/23/health/23beauty.html?fta=y>

<http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/10/01/a-photo-essay-of-breast-cancer/?scp=2&sq=breast%20cancer&st=cse>

<http://www.newscientist.com/search?query=breast+cancer&sortby=rpubdate>

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