

THE CANCER CURVE BALL

I was told I had bowel cancer at about 6pm on a Monday evening, a few minutes after waking from a colonoscopy at Proserpine Hospital. It felt surreal (mainly because I was still a little drugged from the general anaesthetic) but at the same time managed hit me like a sledge hammer to my face. All I remember from this moment were my uncontrollable sobs interspersed with questions followed by more questions to the kind, sad eyes of my doctor.

I had been experiencing regular stomach cramps for over a year. Looking back, I also had other symptoms that had crept up over time and had become a 'new normal' in my life. Exhaustion, bloating, bad gas, oh, and the lump in my stomach.

I am pretty diligent about my health and went to the doctors 4 times during that year. Each time I

was told I was young, healthy and it was probably just my diet or perhaps constipation.

There was, however, regular persistent symptoms and a nagging feeling that 'something just wasn't quite right'. We have a history of cancer in my family and my dear old nan passed away from bowel cancer at 78. But that was far too old for me to worry about now, right?

"You have a narrowing in your bowels and blood in your poo," he said.

What did this 'narrowing' mean? Could it be cancer? Apparently, it could, but I would need to wait up to 6 weeks before I could get a colonoscopy to find out.

The next weeks of my life went by in a cloud, a smog that settled over my head, where I could no longer enjoy anything. I couldn't laugh like I normally would, wine didn't taste as good, everything had a tarnished, contaminated taste.



Rachael Smith

Finally, four weeks later, I saw the doctor who would perform my colonoscopy. He looked at my chart and booked me in straight away, bumping me to the top of the list. I began to panic even more, why was he rushing so much?

By Monday at 1.30pm I was seated in my hospital gown ready to find out, I hadn't eaten since Saturday night and I hadn't had a sip of water since 9am. There were huge delays and I wasn't taken in for the procedure until 5pm. By the time I came out I was depleted of all energy and totally unprepared to hear the words; 'It's Cancer'.

The next 24 hours were a living hell. Real thoughts of whether I was going to die flooded my brain. I had been walking around with a tumour in my bowel for over 18 months and didn't know. It was madness, it was crazy, this couldn't be happening to me. I was 37 for God's sake, I was a single mum to a two-year-old child. The thought of leaving him ripped my heart straight out of my chest.

The next day I had to endure another CT scan, I sobbed as the machine scanned my body to detect whether the cancer had spread.

Fortunately, that same day the doctor called to confirm it was contained within my bowel. The relief made us all cry instantly. Phew! They did, however, want to operate straight away as they were worried it would block my bowel and I could haemorrhage.

Within 48 hours of diagnosis I was driving down to Mackay Base Hospital with a close friend, checking into a hospital room and preparing to have a bowel re-section. Simultaneously my beautiful brother and fiancé were arriving at Proserpine Airport and didn't know anything!

It was strange because at that time I felt totally healthy and fit. I said goodbye to my family and was taken for a four-hour operation. When I emerged, I had tubes coming out of both hands attached to poles, two tubes coming out of my stomach which administered local anaesthetic, a catheter and two large knee length padded socks pumping blood around my body. I was also experiencing the most indescribable pain I had ever had to endure. This went on for six hours until I was stable enough to have a self-administering morphine clicker, which was my saviour.

I spent four more nights in hospital and it was astounding how much I improved every day. The next day I could stand and move shakily around, Saturday I started eating soft foods, Sunday they removed the last of the tubes and by Monday I was brought home by my brother.

The journey, however, didn't stop there. Two weeks later and my pathology results were in. They had dissected the tumour and could now confirm I had stage 111b Bowel Cancer. It had been contained by the bowel but had reached the outer wall and

had infected two out of three lymph nodes. This meant that, to ensure they had removed all the cancer and no rogue cells remained, I would need chemotherapy. Six months intravenous chemotherapy. After this, I could expect to return to normal health.

As I sit here writing this, three weeks after my operation and three weeks before my chemo starts, I feel the healthiest I've been in years. But I know that's about to change. The chemo will attack my body and kill both good and bad cells.

Fortunately, I am seeing an amazing naturopath called Rowena who is the director of Kissin Clinics in Cannonvale. She specialises in Cancer treatments and we will be working in conjunction with the chemo to get my body, mind (and hopefully my hair!) through this journey.

You can follow my story and more in-depth account of how I am using both traditional medicine (chemo) with naturopathy (natural remedies, tonics and diet) to beat cancer in regular articles I will share with readers. If anyone is going through a cancer journey and wishes to connect directly with me, I would love to hear from you.

In the meantime; check your bits, get second opinions and – if you have a nagging feeling – listen to it!

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