

Telling People

Telling people, telling my family, my close friends, and all those who matter to me is exhausting and seemingly endless. It seems to go on and on and on. I wonder if I will ever be done. Some days I feel utterly depleted by the telling.

My matter-of-fact approach is often commented on. I do not know why I am able to tell people that I have just found out that I am dying in such an unemotional fashion, like I was telling them that I had the flu or had resigned from one of my jobs. I keep asking myself "Am I still in shock, or keeping the truth at bay?" Sometimes it all feels very unreal, as if it is happening to someone else.

I am not having any more problems sleeping at night than I had before I heard those fateful words "I suspect you have cancer." But I have become aware that my nights are filled with dreams, dreams of struggle and loss. I wake often from a dream only long enough to remember parts of the dream before sinking back into sleep. They do not keep me awake at night.

I do not pity myself, nor have I ever wondered "Why me?" At every level I have accepted the diagnosis even though I am still waiting for the biopsy that will confirm that I have pancreatic cancer, and that it is Stage 4. Yes, I think it is unfair, cruel even, but it is what it is. I haven't got time to rail against my fate even if I wanted to, which I don't.

Nor do I want to hide the fact that I have cancer. It would take far too much energy, precious energy that I don't have to waste on trying to conceal something that has so completely shattered my world and will soon become obvious to everyone.

Dr Google

Telling my five children that I had pancreatic cancer and wouldn't make my 70th birthday was the most excruciatingly painful thing I have ever done. I was mostly matter-of-fact, blunt and brief – “I have been diagnosed with cancer, pancreatic cancer and I don't have long to live,” was how I began. Then I struggled to hold it together as I absorbed the disbelief, shock and grief of their responses.

I told them that I only had a few years to live, but I actually had no idea how long I had because I hadn't googled it. The following day I learned that my children googled it later that same evening and confronted the truth before I did. We all found the same statistic – 75% of people diagnosed with pancreatic cancer die within a year.

All I thought I knew about pancreatic cancer was that it began silently, and by the time you had symptoms it was too late to do anything about the painful death that you faced. Pancreatic cancer was among the worst of the cancers, if not the worst.

Meanwhile, having briefly abandoned the public health system to get an ultrasound scan followed by a CT scan the next day in the private sector, Dr G referred me into the public health system, namely the Auckland DHB cancer services.

Dancing with Mr D

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In the space of one week which included two visits to my GP, an ultrasound scan and then a CT scan, the life I had been living up till then suddenly vanished. At the end of the first visit my GP told me "I suspect you have cancer." A week later he was phoning me to tell me that the CT scan indicated pancreatic cancer that had spread to my ovaries.

I have decided to write about what is happening to me as part of processing the awful truth that my life is about to end much sooner than I could ever have imagined; I have begun my dance with Mr D.

But let's go back to the beginning, the beginning which is actually the beginning of the end.

I went to see my GP Dr G on Friday 2 October 2015 with my symptoms. He listened carefully, examined me, weighed me and ordered tests, including an FOBT (faecal occult blood test for bowel cancer) which I had refused to have up till then because no-one at the Waitemata DHB pilot could tell me what the false positive and false negative rates of the FOBT were.

Twice during that consultation Dr G referred to his suspicion that I had cancer. The second time was when I stood up to leave and he looked at me and said quietly but firmly "I suspect you have cancer." I like doctors who give it to you straight! While I didn't necessarily believe that I had cancer, I had begun the week-long process that ended with the confirmation of his diagnosis of cancer.

His words that day were a gift that enabled me to prepare for what was about to happen. Six days later I was in his surgery telling him that I still didn't really believe that I had cancer, but if I did I would prefer bowel cancer to ovarian cancer. He replied, "You don't get to choose." The following day I was telling him I would prefer ovarian cancer to

pancreatic cancer. He told me quietly but firmly that I needed to spend the weekend talking to my family.

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