

The later life and times of Nigel Lawrence
or
The final journey of a travelling man

The early years in a nutshell

As a communications engineer I travelled to many places around the globe doing my job and training others in the work, but seven words set my life on a very different journey:

“You have a tumour in your pancreas.”

I was always a healthy person, usually having nothing worse than my annual cold. Tall and slight of build, confident by nature, easily convincing myself of my invulnerability. Illness happened to other people, but all of that was to change in my fiftieth year.

I was working away from home during the week on a fast moving assignment in the north of England. At the same time I was doing a Health and Safety Diploma course in Birmingham. Life was busy and the weekends too short, but things in general were going quite well.

A pain or a real pain

In the July / August I developed a pain in the left side of my abdomen, which felt like a pulled muscle, but the discomfort stayed too long and I started taking paracetamol to overcome the increasing level of pain. By September the pain had moved to a more central position and intensified. I consulted my doctor and he was unperturbed, saying keep taking the pills and come back in a couple of weeks if it had not cleared up.

So I went back to see him again. By this time I was on the safe upper limit of paracetamol and I felt that something more serious was amiss.

I was referred to Worcester Infirmary for tests. Two sessions at Worcester in January saw an X-ray, a colonoscopy, an ultra-sound and finally a CT scan undertaken.

The CT scan finally located the problem and hence the seven words.

My old life had just stumbled, missed a beat and changed forever.

Whipples? I thought it was a hat

I have always considered myself to be a lucky person, so where was my luck now?

The answer, although a little obscured at the time, was revealed when I met the surgeons a week later at the QE and was told that the tumour was operable, but that the long-term cure rate was low. I was fortunate to be in the 20% of pancreatic cancer sufferers for whom an operation (Pylorus preserving Whipples operation) was a possibility. The other 80% could not have the operation but could have chemotherapy to try to control their cancers.

Within three weeks of the original diagnosis I had my operation at the QE.

I was to find out much about my cancer and my treatment over the next month.

Just some of those things

My tumour had been so close to the nerves around my main north-south artery that it had grown in amongst them. Removing them completely had not been possible without risking damaging me in other areas of my body. With the complex location of the tumour, the lengthy operation somehow reduced the blood flow to my liver and caused part of it to “die”. This was a first for the surgical team, who had never seen the like of it before. It was picked up during a period when I became quite unwell. But the liver regenerates itself and so the other side of my liver would enlarge to fulfil the task of both sides.

A wound infection added to the tally of “just one of those things” that were happening to me. I progressed to solid food again after about ten days post-op, but unfortunately I had a leak of gastric juices from one of the new internal connections. It is not uncommon for patients who have this operation to have this complication; about 30% of the total. Just another one of those things! I was returned to intravenous feeding for the next two weeks to give the joints time to seal themselves.

I finally left hospital after more than four weeks, with an open wound, but which the district nurses would dress.

I made good progress at home and Karen, my wife, arranged a short break in Devon. The morning of our departure I had an intense pain in my chest, which I later presented my GP with, for diagnosis. After a thorough examination she referred me back to Worcester with a suspected pulmonary embolism. Worcester confirmed this by the end of the day, and so started a six-month period on warfarin to thin my blood. We got away rather late for our weekend, and the list of “just another of those things” grew a little longer.

Getting back on track

The weeks went by and I grew in strength and well-being. In April I started on a trial of adjuvant chemotherapy, which provides for post-operative treatment to try to improve upon the survival rate for the operation. I had been advised to go on the trial by many of the surgical team, given the impossibility in getting all of the tumour cells and a good safety margin around them.

At the end of my second chemo session (five days on in one week, then three weeks off) I noticed and mentioned a pain in my right hip that lasted a few days and then went.

Back to those things again

I was given assurances that pancreatic cancer never went to bone, but to be certain, I had a bone scan, which proved inconclusive. So I had an MRI scan which also showed something, but was inconclusive. So a bone biopsy was ordered, which entailed an overnight stay at the Royal Orthopaedic Hospital. The results confirmed my worst fears, and confounded the experts; my cancer has spread to my right hip and is now deemed as incurable. Any further treatment will be palliative.

Just one of those things I guess.

The final destination of my journey is already decided, but I have many small trips along the way.

I travel to France regularly and intend to go back to India with Karen for a holiday this year.

I am also looking forward to taking a flying lesson, and have taken up painting again. I am also renovating a property in France as well as assisting my daughter with her new (old) house. I cannot think when I found time to work full time, with so many other things to do.

At this point in time I live for today and leave the tomorrows to take care of themselves. What happens between now and then will be "just another of those things."

I am still very well; in fact if you didn't know I have cancer you couldn't tell from appearances.

I have told Karen that we will try to fight this disease for as long as we have together.