

## My Cancer Journey

A little background: I have had lumps in my breasts since puberty. At first, I hated them and tried to squeeze them out, to no avail! All that was about 60 years ago. I never noticed any difference until about November 2023, when the right breast got a little warmer, itchy, and swelled up a little. By February 2024, things were back to normal, or as normal as I remembered (I was ignoring them).

In mid-July, the itch was back, the breast was swollen again, and there was an itchy scale by the nipple. It was getting quite uncomfortable, so made an appointment to see the doctor. on August 2<sup>nd</sup>. The doctor thought it might have been an infection in a cyst and prescribed an Antibiotic. She also forwarded a note to the Breast Screening Clinic to arrange for a Mammogram.

**Monday, August 19**, I went for a Mammogram, painless, but no indication that anything was wrong.

**Friday, August 30**, I was called in to have an Ultrasound and biopsy. However, the consultant was quite concerned, but didn't want to alarm me. I had to wait till the following Friday Sept 6 for results.

*I was wondering if they had stirred up a wasps' nest by sticking a stick into it? After the biopsy, my body went on revolt: my auto-immune diseases flared up, uncontrollably, my wrists ceased, my scalp was burning as if scalded. The Rheumatologist put me on Prednisone to help with the suspected rheumatoid arthritis. The lump had swollen again, and was quite warm, not quite as hard as before, but quite a bit larger.*

**Friday, September 6**. Definitely Breast Cancer! My doctor broke the news to me in a very no-nonsense way, straight to the point, no mincing around. Traces were also found in a lymph node as well.

*My Reaction: While I am not in complete disbelief, it hasn't really sunk in as yet. I am not angry or blaming anyone; it's just one of those things that happens! I'm one of 200 cases of breast cancer that are male! Maybe I should have listened to my body sooner! That's one thing that should be noted: to "listen" to your body; if it doesn't feel right, it often isn't.*

**The HB Breast Cancer Trust, along with the Breast Cancer Foundation, sent me a package containing information on breast cancer, which was altogether too much information considering I had just been told I had a "woman's disease", and my head was just in another place. All the info would have been great if I'd been a woman, but very little had any relevance for a man. The only thing I found, on the Breast Cancer Foundation web site was an excellent publication called "Understanding Cancer – written by a man for men" – required reading for men!**

**Friday, September 27**. A visit to the Surgeon to see what happens next. He really can't tell us much as a lot depends on what they find after the surgery. He just talked us through the surgery and what might happen. We also met with the H B Cancer Nurse, so we can put a face to a name.

*My reaction: It's real! My mind is in a bit of a tizz. Wasn't really paying attention on the drive back to Napier, but went and had lunch before going home. I must recommend that both my daughters are enrolled in the mammogram program in case I have the defective gene. I'm getting ahead of myself: I can't get angry, but I wonder if I should have said something about my lump sooner.*

**Tuesday, October 1..** A phone call from the DHB Booking office, asking me to come in for Pre-admission on October 3, with Surgery scheduled for Wed October 9.

*My Reaction: It's all happening. I can't wait to get rid of this nasty. It's as itchy as anything. I'm not really worried, more fatalistic about the outcome. It has to come out! I also feel as if it totally out of my hands.*

**Thursday, October 3.** Pre-admission Clinic. Put through the wringer by the pre-assessment Nurse, filling in screeds of paper work, then on to the Registrar, more simple questions, then on to the Anaesthetist who was brilliant. We were taken through every eventuality, but he was confident that nothing untoward would happen.

**Friday, October 4.** Habit Health Physio for pre-screening appointment, paid for by the HBBCT. The Physio and put me through a few tests to get a baseline, especially the amount of fluid in my arm. This is used to measure for Lymphoedema.

**Wednesday, October 9.** Into the Operation Area at 7.15, being first on the list. Nil by mouth from midnight! At 8.30, wheeled into the Operating Theater, after completing more paperwork and agreeing to everything, was put under. I woke in Recovery about 12, and was kept there till 3 before being sent to a ward for an overnight stay. At no time was there any undue pain; mostly just discomfort. I found it helpful to leave my arm on the bed rail, as it was too uncomfortable close to my body as I'd had the lymph nodes remove under my arm. There were drains in place to drain excess lymph fluid and blood from the wounds.

*My Reaction: Well it's all done now. Discomfort is the biggest thing, as I can't use my arm much, although more than I thought. Just have to remember to take it carefully as I don't want to stress the wound. I have applied to the Breast Cancer Foundation for funding for the Physio, so hopefully it will come through.*

**Friday, October 11.** Home again after getting a script filled at the chemist. Good to have shower and wash, being careful with the wound dressings. Had an appointment with the District Nurse to get into the system, and get wounds checked. Drain bottle for Axilla is nearly full, while only 30ml in drain from the breast. Had to change the Axilla bottle as I didn't think it would last till the next day when the first visit from the nurse would happen.



This was taken on Friday morning, showing the location of the wounds, and the sites of the drains.

**Saturday, October 12.** The Breast Drain is removed as there was no more fluid coming from the wound. The nurse removed it in her visit, and inspected the wounds. All satisfactory!

*Just going to take time to heal now. Had a ring from The Cancer Nurse at the DHB, who said they will have the results from the Cancer Group on November 1<sup>st</sup> along with a treatment plan for going forward, along with the pathology.*

***More Waiting!***

The Breast drain was removed after 2 days, as there was very little in the way of fluids from that wound. The Axilla drain however, is pouring out 120-150ml a

day, 7 days after the operation. It will stay until it drops to less than 30ml per day.

**Saturday, October 19.** Had a feeling that I had an infection starting in one of the cuts, so, after checking with the District Nurses, I went to A&E at the Hospital to get checked out. A very thorough check out it was too; they took bloods, blood & oxygen levels, and gave me a pain killer to ease the discomfort. After spending considerable time waiting, the on duty Surgeon came and checked me out, checking the wound sites very carefully, and replaced the drain hose as it appeared to clogged.

His diagnosis was that it was largely nerve pain, centered on the shoulder and under-arm, in front of where the nodes were removed. I am also ER (Estrogen Receptor) Positive, (there are more options for treatment in ER Cancers) which means a 5 year course of Tamoxifen hormone treatment.

Lovely!! So I now have that to add to my drug cupboard, and also Nortriptyline for nerve pain. This will be confirmed at the Clinic on Nov 1.

*My Reaction: OK, it wasn't a wasted day, but it did wonders for my concerns, and helped calm the nerves. It really does pay to talk to the professionals, and not go all macho on everyone. Also, tell your friends, family, workmates, bosses and others. Two reasons: it helps to talk about it, and paves the way if anything untoward happens, including the worst. Being forced to talk about it was hard, but it gets easier, and you will find support in odd places. You'll be amazed at who and where you'll get support from, and others with similar stories to tell, although not necessarily MBC (Male Breast Cancer).*

*I have found 1 book, and 2 pamphlets that I would class as "essential reading" for those with MBC, and families. They answer a lot of questions, provide insightful suggestions, and best of all, help make you feel that you aren't alone.*

**Sunday, October 27.** The last drain came out! I couldn't feel anything as it was removed, but I certainly didn't miss the bottle hanging beside me for the last 18 days. It was a relief to have it removed as I had to be careful not to get the drain tube caught on anything – that certainly pulled me up quickly! No pain, just discomfort from the wound itself. The drain site was a bit red and angry looking, but cleared up within 2 days; just pleased to get the tube out! I'm to see the surgeon on Friday, November 1<sup>st</sup> to get the results of the pathology. They have been in the back of my mind since the operation, wonder what. Friday will tell.

**Friday, November 1.** This is the day I find out the news; good, bad or indifferent! Invasive Ductal Carcinoma, grade 2, and 27mm in size. My report says the margins are clear, however, they only found the cancer in 1 of 23 lymph nodes removed. I'm also ER-positive, PR-positive, HER2 negative, which is treated by using hormones therapy. So now that the report has been done, if I had to get MBC, then this is perhaps the "best" one to get, or should I say, the one with the best chance of being cancer free. After this is the care plan, which will probably involve radiation therapy.

Other than that, the wound itself is nearly healed; clean and free of any discharge from drain sites. Radiation therapy will wait until I'm properly healed; another couple of weeks, then another meeting to determine the care plan, involving hormone therapy (Tamoxifen) and radiation (to mop up any cancer cells left in the lymph nodes or blood stream). A lot of papers were given to me, again all relating to women, with ladies' breasts in the diagrams, and irrelevant. These get my back up, which is part of the male physic, but it still annoys me, and I find it rather insulting to be compared to a woman with a woman's disease. Another strike against the men!

*My Reaction: Well, this is certainly a positive result, coming from a dark place. All sorts of thoughts could have been running round my mind if I'd let them. I just had to not think about the worst, but*

*instead, trying to be “normal” and acting as if I didn’t have cancer at all, until the report came out. I find the generic report given to me as rather insulting, ignoring the fact that I’m male, and really have no breasts to speak of. This is why I use the term MBC (Male Breast Cancer) instead of BC! BC is for women!*

*After reading about MBC, of all the cancers I could have gotten, the one I have is probably the one with the best chance of becoming cancer free in the short term. The radiation therapy will be 1-3 weeks, and hopefully done within the next 2 months. I am looking forward to getting the care plan done, so I can know with some certainty what’s going to happen going forward. I’m more than frustrated with the not knowing – it’s very tiring!*

#### **Care plan.**

The Care Plan consists of Tamoxifen plus radiation, at Palmerston North Hospital. That will be for a week at a time, staying at Ozanam House, which is accommodation for cancer patients undergoing radiation treatment.

#### **Essential Reading:**

- 1. *Male Breast Cancer: Taking Control by Prof. John Boyages. (Available online at the Breast Cancer Foundation). (ISBN 978-0-9806311-7-3)***
- 2. *Breast Cancer in Men; Understanding Cancer –written by men, for men. (Cancer Society, available online)***
- 3. *Breast Cancer: What Happens after Surgery (Breast Cancer Foundation, available online)***

***Any or all I would heartily endorse, as these helped my wife and I come to grips with this disease.***

***As a last, I would like to take this time and space to thank each and every one who helped me, starting with my wife, whom is a tower of strength, and still is, despite her own fears about where this cancer might lead.***

***To all the others, too many to mention: the hospital staff, Breast Cancer Foundation, HB Breast Cancer Trust, HB District Nurses, friends and family: the support has been nothing short of amazing. All this support has made this journey a lot less intimidating than it would have been just a few short years ago.***

***Sincerely,***

***Merv***