



Prostate cancer – my journey by Matt Rannamets

“Four years ago my life was taken away from me. Today I have it back”

In the summer of 2003 it slowly began to dawn on me that I was having to get up at night to go to the loo rather more than usual. I vaguely remember thinking at the time that this might have something to do with my prostate but a quick glance at the family medical book convinced me it was probably nothing to worry about. And anyway I was 57 so figured this was one of the things that happened with age – and in any case I felt just fine.

A few months later I went to my GP with a chest infection and in passing mentioned my more frequent nocturnal visits to the loo. He thought it was probably nothing but suggested I have a blood test anyway to check something called my Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) levels – soon after this I was alarmed to get a personal call from the doctor with the results.

The blood test showed my PSA count was 153 – the normal range is somewhere between zero and four. I was duly referred to a consultant urologist at Stevenage Hospital for a biopsy of my prostate. This confirmed that cancer was present and worse still that it was a particularly aggressive version which was inoperable. The bottom line was that I could expect to live for two, possibly three years.

It's difficult to describe one's feelings when confronted with this sort of news. I remember feeling shock and disbelief as I drove away from the hospital, calling into a garage to fill up my car with unleaded petrol on my way home. The only problem was I was driving a brand new Ford Focus Diesel car. So my first day as a newly diagnosed cancer sufferer was spent trying to drain unleaded petrol out of my car, not an easy feat.

Anyway my consultant told me not to worry too much as there were various different treatments that would keep me going. One of these was hormone therapy which I was prescribed to slow the growth of the cancer and then my doctor referred me to Dr Heather Payne, a consultant clinical oncologist and trustee of the Prostate Cancer Research Centre (hence the connection) for radiotherapy treatment.

One of the worst things about being diagnosed with cancer was feeling completely helpless. I had suddenly lost control of my life and my destiny. Over time, however, I was able gradually to come to terms with the situation. I think it's called 'living with cancer'. Despite the pessimistic prognosis, I began to convince myself that this thing could be beaten. I read voraciously on the subject, scanning the internet for more information and reading every relevant book I could get my hands on. I found Lance Armstrong's book "It's Not About the Bike" inspirational.

I joined a gym and started a fairly strenuous fitness regime. I changed my diet, cutting out all dairy products, red meat, sugar and anything with a high fat content. I was not naive enough to believe that any of these measures would cure me (despite some of the claims I read) but it did give me back a sense of control and purpose to my life. It felt good to be doing something positive about my cancer.

Very few people are lucky enough to win the lottery, but my turn came when I was referred to Dr Payne*. My cancer had spread beyond the prostate and there were indications of spread to my lymph nodes too. I was responding quite well to hormone treatment and Dr Payne started to talk about more radical treatment options – with curative intent instead of simply managing the condition.

Dr Payne suggested a procedure known as High Dose Rate Brachytherapy. This involves very high doses of radiation being delivered direct to the prostate in an attempt to kill all of the cancer there. This would be followed up with a six week course of intensive external beam radiotherapy designed to mop up any cancer cells that might be floating around my pelvic area. HDR Brachytherapy is not widely available. It is a complex and highly technical procedure requiring the skill, input and coordination of many medical professionals. The teamwork was absolutely incredible.

I think my fitness regime and change of diet helped me cope reasonably well with the barrage of radiation I received. But at the end of the day I was fortunate to have been in the right place at the right time (but only just I think) and with the right consultant.

My PSA count appears to have stabilised at a very low 0.2 and whilst nothing in life is certain I can now look forward with optimism to a full life ahead. Whatever happens I have tremendous gratitude for the treatment I have had as a cancer patient in the NHS. Four years ago my life was taken away from me – today I have it back.