
Our journey with Cancer (Lymphoma) via Faith

Back in August 2018, Barbara and I were recently returned from the Christadelphian Conference in Brisbane. We felt refreshed and had made the decision to downsize from our large family home of 46 years, possibly to an apartment. We spent the next few weeks preparing the house for sale.

Uncertain diagnosis

During October, Barbara noticed some trouble with her eyes and following a few consultations ended up with a lovely specialist, who put her on a treatment of cortisone. Very late that year Barbara was completely exhausted and found it hard to walk up our front drive. There was a night where pain in her back was so severe, that we called 'Nurse at Home'. After some talking, they called an ambulance and it was off to hospital.

The hospital thought it was muscular. The pain kept on, and so Barbara went to her general practitioner, who sent her back to the hospital for more tests. Sandra (the GP) sent her to a specialist, more tests and then to another specialist, with still no answers. By that time, we both felt that it was quite serious, and mention was made of a possibility of cancer. There was no doubt this stunned us, but we agreed we would enter the journey together, wherever it might lead, and whatever the outcome. Little did we know what lay before us.

As we waited for the results of tests, we were prepared for the worst, and had twice been given the name of the best oncologist in the Eastern Suburbs of Melbourne. Sandra (the GP), confirmed with Barbara that the recommended oncologist was the best, but he was extremely busy. At last came the visit to see the specialist, who told us that it was lymphoma (non-Hodgkin's) and he was referring us to an oncologist who had just saved the life of the father of the specialist. It was Joe McKendrick. I think it fair to say that at that point we knew that Jesus, our lovely Lord, was with us on this journey. We both say Joe has been amazing. Thankfully with good private health cover there was no delay. Barbara went into hospital the next morning both daughters present, one having flown down from Sydney.

Now the journey was like a 747 leaving with no stopping. Tests; treatments; no time to think too much. A close friend from London called me, we'll call him Don. 'Remember', he said, 'Cancer is a word not a sentence'. Also, Joe's first words after indicating his diagnosis and plan for treatment, 'This is eminently treatable'. Chemo was started the next day - every three weeks for three months. Then more tests and the result that Barbara was clear.

Strong support

During this time the support of the members of Ringwood Meeting, with cooked meals and cards and calls of encouragement was overwhelming. Yay, we all rejoiced, and the sale of our home, which had been put on hold was finalised. We bought a new 5th Floor apartment in Central Ringwood, and moved there in late August 2019.

A few weeks later, Barbara was playing in a music concert in Olivet and the music was 'wavy'. And I told Barbara her driving was veering to the left, along the gutter. So, it was back to see Sandra and we were blessed with getting an appointment within an hour of our attempt. Immediately, Barbara was sent for a brain scan, which found three lesions. Joe had her straight back in Epworth Eastern Hospital, but he wanted to be sure that it was a return of the earlier lymphoma, and not something different. Barbara was transferred to a city hospital for a brain biopsy which confirmed it was the earlier Lymphoma back again, but in the brain. It was such a shock, and dare we say, a disappointment after being told she was in remission. Actually, Joe had said that he deals in cures and not remission. Something to do with treatment of lymphoma. Once Barbara's head was recovered from the brain surgery, it was back into hospital for aggressive chemo. Joe halted the chemo after three (3) sessions as it was too hard on Barbara's body.

Joe suggested she went for a bone marrow transplant, which we had never heard of before. So, it was another specialist who Joe managed to persuade to take Barbara's case, as her age was very close to the cut off. Then started a period of preparation which needed some weight gain, but eventually it was time to harvest some of her own bone marrow. At the time Andrew Powell, whom I had met the very first day I arrived in Australia back in March 1965, and whose grandchildren Barbara was teaching to play the piano, told me of two cases he knew of where success had followed the treatment. A brother in Auckland told me that at their recent Bible School they had celebrated with Pat Oosthuizen, the 30th Anniversary of her treatment.

During this time our four children were amazing in their support, which I personally needed (looking back). When we marry, we repeat the words, 'in sickness and in health', a vow we perhaps never expect to have to put into practice, at least the first part. From my part, all I could do was watch and be there. Even now, I don't know how I managed. Without the great support network I had, sent from God, it would not have been possible. However, taking each day as it came, we both survived.

The importance of friends

Support for the primary carer is so important, and I can assure all that there was no lack of this. Besides the meals from Ringwood sisters, we knew of prayers almost worldwide with Christadelphians. Barbara's former colleagues and parents of her private students added their support and prayers, and so our names were raised in prayer in churches of other denominations. A neighbour crocheted a Prayer Shawl, another lit candles in her church. Don rang from London nearly every day, often at times, when I was struggling. Gerry Thornewell was another constant shoulder to lean upon. All the time I kept up a happy smile, being the support that Barbara so needed, hanging on Joe's words, 'eminently treatable', and trying to rest in the Lord.

Ron Wiggins asked us how the journey had affected our faith. A big question. No doubt it has, in many ways. We both are strongly convinced the Church is so much more than our community, and that the prayers of so many other people brought a great response from our lovely Lord. Strength came, often at the right time. Added to this were the complications of the COVID pandemic with the associated lockdown.

There was a time when our two eldest children sat me down, while Barbara was away for almost a month, recovering in Box Hill Hospital from the bone marrow transplant. They pointed out that Barbara might not make it through, and did I have a Plan B. In fact, I did not, how could I? We had come so far, through delays and the difficulty in harvesting the bone marrow. We know that we have been so blessed, and many have provided that which was needed in that exact time.

A few names have been mentioned, there are so many others, both near and far. All providing support in so many ways, by calls, emails and on social media. Thinking now in January 2022, we think of all the help, all the support, all the prayers – all 'In Jesus Name'.

The importance of prayer – and God's grace

Caring is so important, the primary carer in support of a loved one; the actual patient who has a determined mind to overcome the cancer, and those who care for the carer, all labourers together. God does hear our prayers, He sees the hearts and minds of all those who seek His help through prayer.

We are both greatly blessed, highly favoured, and importantly, 'Saved by Grace'.

Barbara & Martin Clementson
