

## **Julie's story**

Mother's Day 2023 I finally had a meltdown and admitted I'd found a lump. I'd felt it for weeks, maybe months, but tried to dismiss it.

It was obviously playing on my mind as I started crying over the fact my nine-month-old wouldn't sit still for a photo! What followed was a whirlwind.

GP first - who agreed she could also feel the lump which was a relief that it wasn't just me, but also an obvious worry. She referred me and, within a month, I arrived at the hospital for a mammogram.

My partner's father was also very ill at the time and, thinking I wouldn't be told anything there and then, I advised her she was OK to continue with her day.

I thought it would be a quick scan, go home to wait for a letter. But it wasn't. I went from an examination, where the consultant drew a cross on me indicating she could also feel the lump, to a mammogram, then a scan and then a biopsy.

I watched the screen and could see a black shape and remembered thinking this must be a cyst. As I got dressed the consultant said the results would be around three weeks.

I asked if she could tell me anything to which she replied: "Do you want to know?" Obviously, yes, I now need to know!

She then said: "Put it this way, there's something there, if it comes back as benign then I'll be sending it back. You will need an operation and radiotherapy; it looks operable to me."

I recall having a few tears and then walking out thinking: 'Wow, this wasn't supposed to happen to me'. Then followed the reveal to my family, friends and colleagues. This was interesting. Some people cried, some swore, and some were distant.

Within a few weeks, in May 2023, I was in for surgery. I didn't quite expect the size of the scar. They removed a lump 2.8 cm in diameter, along with some surrounding tissue. They also took two lymph nodes to check if it had spread.

The recovery was sore. The bruising was nasty, and the scars kept weeping in one area. Antibiotics and other tablets were my friend. Sleep was almost impossible. I was to expect radiotherapy after a recovery period of around a month. But then the shock, the cancer had spread to my lymph nodes, and I needed a 'full clearance' so, in June, around a month after my first operation I was in for a second.

I emerged with a drain attached to me which took away excess fluid from the area my lymph nodes previously were, and some extra scars. I had the drain for about a week, carrying it around in a shoulder bag the hospital had provided.

I felt battered. I felt old and I felt really sorry for myself at this point! Soon after I had a PICC line fitted. This is a catheter with a long tube threaded into the inner upper arm that goes all the way to a large vein by the heart.

The idea is for this to be used to take blood, give chemotherapy and other drugs, and to avoid finding a suitable vein to administer and the damage this can cause when done multiple times.

This was painful from the beginning, perhaps even more than the surgeries. I attended hospital shortly after as the pain was excruciating. They checked it and, as they could take blood, said it was in OK and perhaps they had bruised me putting it in.

All was revealed when it was removed post-chemo and it took three nurses who ended up having to cut and split it in half to remove as it was in so deep. I have a little scar as a reminder for this stage.

Late July 2023 and chemo begins. Eight sessions, three weeks apart. Two different types of chemo, each bringing an array of delightful side effects which I won't go into. I'm on tablets galore and having to self-inject for seven days after each chemo which I can't bear to do and rely on my rock to administer.

My hair falls out after about two weeks which, although I know is pretty inevitable, is still a shock. The worst bit for me was losing my eyebrows and eyelashes. I just looked odd.

My energy levels are at rock bottom. I can't imagine how difficult this is for Emma, my partner, my rock, having not only me but our little one and two dogs to contend with.

I tried to not be a burden as much as possible but sometimes I just can't move or function.

Despite a few hiccups and a few extra antibiotics, I avoid any serious side effects that require hospitalisation and consider myself lucky to finish chemo on schedule mid-December.

I was then given just over a month off to recover. My hair starts growing back, my energy levels increase slowly, but the side effects continue. I begin tablets which I will take for 10 years.

My legs throb in the morning and overnight due to toxins and I find myself in menopause with awful hot flushes, sweats and a changeable tolerance to situations. And so, to radiotherapy. A month of being blasted every day. The hospital is 45 mins away also and sometimes the appointment, which only takes about 15 minutes, has run late by over an hour. So, for that month that's all you do. Radiotherapy brings another host of unpleasant side effects.

So here I am now. I've just returned to work on a phased return. Work has been great. I've had contact throughout my 12 months off, but no expectations or pressure on me.

I was supported on full pay throughout via the Reg 28 board and have to thank them for this. Money is the last thing you want to worry about when all this is going on. I continue 'on the up'.

I have some ongoing issues and am attending hospital for this still. I also have six-monthly infusions for my bones. My first mammogram since this all began came back negative.

My consultant says: “We don’t say cancer-free or in remission, what we say is there’s no sign of disease, but we aren’t looking for it.”

I’ll take that. I can’t thank the NHS enough. From the GP to the breast care team, surgeons, consultants and radiologists. Amazing individuals.

The kindness from my partner, friends, family, and colleagues and even strangers can be overwhelming and sometimes quite unexpected.

It changes you, for the better. I appreciate so much more in my life. I am scared though. It is scary when the Big C gets you. Before now this was always someone else’s story, and I was pretty much fit and healthy.

The clear mammogram gives me hope although I do feel like I’m holding my breath for the next round of ‘something’. I know I’m one of the lucky ones though and I am hoping, as times goes on, I get back to some sort of normality – whatever that is! I think it’s getting there.