

## Tricia Moate    Life Blood: A Sarcoma Patient's Thanks

Thank you for inviting me here and for giving me this opportunity to say thank you to each and every one of you, your precious gifts of blood have been crucial to my survival. I think I have had about 20 units of blood and I am so grateful for every drop.

I always knew that I had been lucky: opposites attract, I was a risk averse coward and married a sensation seeking Royal Marine who enjoyed jumping out of perfectly serviceable aircraft; our son had grown up without becoming embroiled in drugs, alcohol or criminality; I had the best job in the world working as a specialist nurse at Royal Bournemouth Hospital. My luck ran out in 2004 when I was diagnosed with sarcoma.

Sarcoma is a rare cancer, it is a cancer of the connective tissues eg muscle, bone, cartilage, blood vessels, nerve fibres, skin, fat etc so it can be anywhere in the body and can affect all ages - a completely non-discriminating cancer. You can't screen for it. A GP in his/her career may never have seen a sarcoma patient. Patients can present with a lump but if the lump is deep in the body it may not present symptoms until it is advanced. Sadly sarcoma is often misdiagnosed and when it is diagnosed it is often late when it has already spread in the body and is incurable.

Being a nurse did not protect me from the shock of diagnosis of cancer. Out of the blue and without any risk factors I had had a DVT in my leg and a few months later I started coughing up blood and a chest x ray revealed what looked like a cotton wool ball at the bottom of my right lung. By now I was losing weight and feeling weak. The doctors suspected cancer and wanted to remove the tumour to find out exactly what it was. The consent form for lung surgery is

not for wimps - with the possible consequences of surgery being haemorrhage and death. I felt I had no choice as if I did not agree to surgery I was going to die anyway; a strange calmness came over me, I'd had a good life, I was 53 and at least I'd **had** a life and a family, I had nursed many who had died without either.

I woke up in ITU saying that I had been "stabbed" - in fact I had as I had two chest drains in place which help drain and re inflate the lung. The surgeon came to tell me that the tumour was malignant and had gone off for further testing. I felt incredibly weak, so weak that I was frightened that I was going to die, I honestly felt that I did not have enough strength to survive. Units of blood pulled me through. My Hb (iron level in blood) had dropped very low as the operation was long and bloody and I was in great need of replacement blood. The first unit of blood arrived and was checked and put up. I lay in bed watching the thick precious red drops falling into the chamber on the giving set, I remember feeling so emotional and thankful that a complete stranger had given me their blood and that they would never know how their blood had been used and who had received it. After two units of blood I began to feel stronger and they affected me emotionally as well as physically: the blood had helped to restore my hope which had ebbed away with the low HB. Hope is terribly important when you are facing cancer, I don't mean false hope but true hope which is when you are aware of the reality of the situation but you are able to cope with whatever is going on at that moment in time.

Four months later the doctors found the primary sarcoma behind my knee, it was inoperable as it was wrapped around my artery, nerve and veins, and had been the cause of the DVT. They would not amputate my leg as by now I had another 8 tumours spreading across

both lungs. Six weeks radiotherapy to knee followed and then more lung surgeries.

In the middle of the night following my third lot of lung surgery, I pressed the nurse call button as my chest was hurting despite the morphine I had had earlier. On the ward was a beautiful Indian nurse, she had a fabulous smile and a calm serene demeanour but this time when she came into my room her face showed extreme fear and she ran out immediately, when she reappeared she grasped my hand and said "You're going to be alright" which perplexed me.

Within minutes, my room was filled with out of breath medics, nurses and porters. I was rapidly laid flat and I felt like I was in a surreal version of ER. They were barking orders at each other, it transpired that I had been bleeding out into the chest drain and I would need to go back into theatre for the surgeon to stop the bleeding. Units of blood arrived and one medic had hold of the bag and was just squeezing it so that the blood was pouring into the chamber and tubing. Thoughts were filling my head: that I was going to die without being able to say goodbye to my husband and my son; that I was no longer going to suffer - that it was a good way to die as I would be given an anaesthetic and not wake up, just like going to sleep; that it would be horrible for the staff to have a patient die on the operating table. As they sped me along the corridor to theatre, the medic by my side commented that he could hear my heart beating - that tells you how frightened I was. I have no doubt that the blood and the skill of the staff saved my life. The Indian nurse told me later that when the ward nurses heard that I had made it through surgery and had arrived in ITU "we jumped up and down".

Two years later the cancer spread to my small bowel which the Consultant told me was "rarer than hen's teeth". By now I was

disenchanted by rarity. The cancer was causing bleeding into the gut and I was grossly anaemic with the familiar feelings of utter exhaustion and hopelessness. I was so grateful to receive multiple units of blood before and after the bowel surgery. Again the myriad positive effects of the blood transfusion boosted me physically and psychologically.

Today I am still living with sarcoma and have had further lung surgery, radiofrequency ablation, cyberknife radiotherapy and distal femoral replacement. Treatments for sarcoma nowadays are complex and can be groundbreaking but be assured that blood transfusions are an essential part of that treatment and for which we both thank you from the bottom of our hearts.