

Real stories: Don MacLean

My name is Don MacLean, I'm married to Pat, and living in Knock, Point. Before retiring I was employed as Outdoor Learning Manager with the Comhairle's Sport & Health Section.

The 12th November is a date that will always stick in my mind. It was on this date in 2013 that I was told that I had stomach cancer. To say I was in shock is an understatement.

I had suffered from arthritis and had been taking diclofenac pain killers for about four months to control my pain. I noticed that every time I ate I would be sick. I didn't feel nauseous or anything – just couldn't keep anything down. I blamed the tablets, stopped taking them and the sickness stopped.

However, I carried on losing weight and had no energy. After lots of nagging from my wife I decided to go to the doctor who decided to investigate my weight loss and loss of energy.

Over the next three weeks I had an endoscopy, scan, examination, and an appointment with my consultant on the 12th November. This was when I was told that I had stomach cancer.

Although the consultant did go on to explain things, I didn't take anything in. All I could hear was the word CANCER. I went home to tell my wife and was visited by the MacMillan Cancer Support nurses three days later. They were brilliant and explained in simple layman's terms my situation, and what would happen in the future in terms of diagnosis, prognosis, etc. It was after seeing them that things seemed to make sense. I made up my mind that whatever life had in store for me, I was going to face it head on.

Two weeks later I went to Raigmore Hospital where they did tests and confirmed that I had stomach cancer. At my next GP appointment I was told that they weren't looking at operating on me. This was a further blow, however I didn't let it get me down.

A few weeks later I received a letter from Raigmore to say they wanted me out for more tests and a consultation. On arrival at Raigmore, I was asked who had accompanied me as they were going to have to sedate me for tests. This came as a surprise because I didn't expect them to be able to do anything for me, but I went ahead and had the tests done.



After coming round from sedation, the consultant himself then got changed, met me and took me to his car, and then drove me to the airport, waiting with me until the flight boarded. With service like this you certainly can't knock the National Health Service! This same consultant, when I first met him, his words to me were, "Hello Mr MacLean, my job is to sort you out and let you get on with living the rest of your life so let's get on with it".

Following the results of my tests and consultations with the GP, consultant, nurses, etc I was told that they had made a decision to operate as they felt it would be successful, but prior to the operation I was required to have chemotherapy. Because I hadn't had any symptoms, my stomach cancer wasn't that advanced, and it seemed the reaction I was having to the diclofenac may possibly have saved my life.

Six weeks after my first visit to the GP, I started chemotherapy in Raigmore. I went in on a Monday and stayed there till Thursday, then went home. On Sunday, the district nurses came and removed the chemo pump. I then had two weeks off and had my second of three sessions.

Luckily, I didn't suffer nausea, but I lost weight, lost all my body hair, even my moustache, which I had had for 40 years. I was really tired, my nails stopped growing, and my nose would not stop running – nobody tells you about these small things. My feet were that sensitive that when I put them on the ground after sleeping, the pain would be excruciating. Sometimes I would take 15 minutes just trying to get out of bed. Chemotherapy is something that you really have to go through to understand how it makes you feel, the only thing I can relate it to is running a marathon and hitting the wall, and this happens a few times during the day when you are on chemotherapy.

Once I finished the chemotherapy, I had six weeks off to recover my strength before my operation. My operation lasted nearly 7 hours. My stomach was removed and my oesophagus was connected to my small intestine. After this I spent five days in high dependency and, unfortunately for me, I contracted an infection in my wound which set back my recovery slightly. After five days I was moved from high dependency into the main ward.

The day after my operation, while I was still in high dependency, the physiotherapist got me up and encouraged me to walk the length of the ward. This continued each day with me having to walk a bit further.

The first day I was in the general ward, I was sent for tests to ensure that all the stitches and connections between my oesophagus and intestine were water tight and there were no leakages. I had to drink an opaque juice while they x-rayed me to see if it was leaking anywhere. Following this, I was told everything was fine and I could try some ice cream.

Over the next few days, I progressed from a liquid diet to a more solid diet. This progression and the progression to eating normally has been the most difficult and still is the most difficult part of it – learning what my body will and will not tolerate in terms of food. I now have lots of small meals spread throughout the day, which takes a lot of getting used to. I am back to a more normal diet

now. I lost a lot of weight after the operation. I will never be fat, but I have put on some weight and it seems to have stabilised.

I left hospital after 13 days and I can honestly say that I had not felt pain any of the time I had been in. This was one thing that I was amazed at. Even after getting an infection in my wound, my pain had been controlled really well.

Because of the infection in my wound, the community nurses were coming in daily to dress it. This lasted five weeks before my wound was healed. I had also been left with the feeding tube, which had been used in hospital to provide me with nutrients in case I had problems with eating when I came home, and would be taken out in my follow up appointment. Luckily I didn't have to use it. Nine weeks after the operation, I returned to Raigmore for an outpatient consultation with my surgeon.

At this meeting, my surgeon informed me that, in his opinion, the operation had been curative, my cancer had been confined to my stomach, and by removing my stomach they had removed the cancer and he did not require to see me for six months.

At this appointment, he also removed my feeding tube and, with the wound having healed, I was now allowed to begin cycling, walking and sailing again. I firmly believe that my level of fitness before I was diagnosed led to a much more rapid recovery than if I hadn't been so fit.

Very soon after I was diagnosed, I received a letter/invitation from the Hebridean Men's Cancer Support Group, informing me of their support and meeting times. It was only after I had gone through chemotherapy I decided to go. I wish I had gone earlier though. I have found going to the Hebridean Men's Cancer Group to be beneficial, very supportive and feel it has benefited my recovery both physically and psychologically.

I enjoyed the first meeting that much that I have now been going every week for 5-6 months. Every week there are around 20-30 men going for a coffee and a get-together. We don't always talk about cancer. It could be football, politics or whatever. I would suggest that any man diagnosed with cancer should attend this group because it is invaluable in terms of helping you and enabling you to cope with the reality of your cancer, treatment and recovery.

I have realised that cancer can be a lonely journey, even if you have plenty of people around you. However, over my cancer journey, I have come into contact with some very wonderful people and have felt very humble.

Everyone I have met professionally: doctors, nurses, ward secretaries, domestics, etc, have been truly amazing and I cannot fault anyone I have met in any way or the treatment I have received.

All of the men I met in the course of my cancer journey I have found to be inspirational in many ways. It is only when one is forced to embark on this journey that one truly sees the fortitude, strength, courage and inspiration of people.

I now believe that, although cancer is scary, it is a diagnosis of an illness, and in the majority of cases something positive can be done, and the earlier it can be detected the better.

I was lucky that I had been physically active before, and I have no doubt that this has benefitted me in my recuperation. As well as exercising through canoeing and regular walking, more recently I took part in the 2014 Men's Cancer 5K and was awarded 41st place with a time of 28 mins 25 seconds!