

## Each Day is a Gift: Anita's Experience

I was asked if I would like to write about my experiences with ovarian cancer. My first thought was I can't do that. It's all too complex. How can I help anyone through my experiences? Then I thought of how desperately I wanted to hear from others who had experienced the same fears, hopes, and anxieties that I did when I was first diagnosed in 2006.

I went into Nottingham City Hospital in England for a routine ovarian scan, as I had experienced some pain that I wasn't really happy with on my right ovary. The x-ray technician said "Oh, I can't see your womb; your left ovary is enlarged, about the size of a grapefruit." I knew then, that it wasn't good. My mother had Ovarian Cancer when she was 54. I was 47. I numbly went out to the car, where my husband was waiting and told him "I have to see a specialist, there is something terribly wrong"

The next couple of days were a blur as I first contacted my GP(MD) , and he recommended 3 surgeons he felt were the best in Nottinghamshire. I first saw David Nunns 3 days later, on a Monday.

My operation was scheduled for 7, December, and I would not be well enough to shop for Christmas presents, so I shopped early, wrapping each present , wondering if it would be the last time I sent each person a gift. I didn't want anything myself, except a red dress. I wore that red dress to a party 7 days before my surgery. My husband was like a zombie, I caught him crying a couple of times, which scared me as the only other time I had seen him cry had been in 2001 when we lost our 22 year old son in a boating accident. I also reassured my sons (32 and 17 ) that I was going to be just fine. All the while, I was unable to stop the roller coaster of thoughts going around in my mind.

The big difference for me, being resident in England (I lived there from 1987 to 2007) was that I didn't have to worry about what my illness would do to our finances. I paid to see the surgeon privately, and he informed me that I would get better care if I went through the National Health Service. Privately it would have cost 20,000.00 (pounds) The NHS cost to myself , zero. He would still operate, and the oncology team would be the best available. So within two weeks I was in Nottingham City hospital having my operation. I opted to have a radical hysterectomy and omentectomy, as the surgeon recommended. I knew that I needed to trust my doctors to do what they did, while I concentrated on keeping myself in a positive state of mind. I was fully expecting to have to go through chemotherapy, and was as prepared as anyone could be in a two week time span.

After my surgery, I was quite ill and put into isolation for a week in the hospital, and I didn't have the energy to worry about what would come next. I was sent home for another week before I was given the diagnosis, and staging of my cancer. That was a difficult time, knowing that my fate was not, nor had it ever been in my hands. I was very lucky to learn I had a borderline mucinous tumor of the left ovary. It was 9 cm across, which was quite large, but I was told that there were no cells found in any of the tissue they sent to be analyzed. It was

decided that chemotherapy would not be beneficial to my recovery, I would be monitored closely every 12 weeks for the next two years of my recovery.

I moved back to America 10 months after my operation, and the stress of being ill without insurance in the United States makes me very unhappy. I could not find an insurance company that would insure a cancer patient. My first CT scan cost us over 7000.00. Each time I saw the doctor it was a minimum of 150.00. I thought I would have to leave my family and return to the UK, where I would at least get medical treatment without the financial worry tagged on. I was fortunate enough to find a state plan that I have to reapply for yearly. The only obstacle is that I cannot work whilst on this plan. So I find myself in a catch 22 situation. Nobody asks for cancer, yet on top of the distress of a battle for our life that we must stay vigilant in, there is the financial stress to cope with.

Back to my follow up treatment, I graduated to six monthly visits in Nov 2009, and my next appointment is next week. I find that I get a bit anxious and unsettled a couple of weeks prior to any follow up. What if they find something? We all know that once it's happened to you, there is no way of predicting what the next test may or may not discover. My oncologist here tells me she is not content that I did not have chemotherapy, as the size of my tumor is too large to have been staged properly, in her opinion. I have to lean towards trusting that my UK doctors did the best they could and that I still must trust their opinions. I also know from experience that I must trust my doctor here, and respect her opinions. It doesn't help that I worry what if my insurance stops. What will I do then?

So on the surface, my family and friends see me, Anita, the cancer survivor; the one who is healthy and fit and happy. Oh, don't get me wrong, I am thrilled to be alive and well. But deep inside the recesses of my mind, I have fears that don't surface often, but they do surface from time to time, usually before my follow up visits.

Finding the ovarian cancer website through Kay, and reading her newsletters I have found some comfort here. Women who suffer to stay alive, women who are a joy to know, women who have gone through so much more in terms of their health than I think I would have the courage to face. I get great inspiration from the website and great comfort in knowing there are so many of us fighting our own little battles. I am proud to be a woman. I walked in the Making Strides against Breast cancer walk in Albuquerque NM this year. It was a real honor to walk among so many brave women. And a real privilege to be well enough to walk. It is not our right to have healthy happy lives. Each day is a gift. It is a privilege to wake to each new dawn.