

How Quickly Cancer Appeared

My smear test was due in late December 2019 but, because I was on my period, the check-up was delayed until mid-January 2020. The nurse who took the smear test sample said that my cervix and everything else that she could see looked totally healthy.

In the first week of February 2020 my screening results arrived via post. The letter informed me that there were no concerning issues found, although the sample from the smear screening had flagged up a virus called HPV; at the time, reading these words alone scared me! I knew nothing about HPV and its dangers. This virus can cause abnormal cells to grow on the cervix. This I researched, shortly after putting down the letter.

The letter stated that my next appointment would be in one year's time to check that abnormalities were not occurring. Little did I know that my January 2020 smear screening was not looking for cancer — the screening looks for pre-cancerous cells; i.e. abnormal cells that grow on the cervix.

This very important piece of information about the smear test not looking for cancer was shared by my oncologist at a review meeting that my husband and I later attended. All women who

have cervical cancer get their records reviewed, and this is when I asked how I could have received the all-clear from my smear screening and then only a few weeks later witness subtle signs that a tumour was growing in my cervix! I was totally mystified how only HPV had been detected! My slide was viewed in the lab and then a letter was sent out to me saying “See you in a year” — this letter had indicated that I was healthy! My cervical screening had not detected stage 3 aggressive cancer.

On 17th February 2020, shortly after I learnt of the HPV dangers my body was carrying, I had a small show of blood after sex. I blamed this on the recent smear test, where the nurse had scraped me quite badly. She had said as she took my smear sample, “Sorry if this hurts a little but it’s to gain a good sample for the lab.”

At the end of February, the same thing happened again — a small bleed. Again, I blamed my smear sample being taken. The two bleeds I’ve already mentioned were literally a thumbnail-sized show of blood; it didn’t seem anything too worrying, and I thought that during intercourse my husband was rubbing up against the area the nurse had scraped.

My husband and I decided not to engage in any bedroom fun for one month to give my cervix a chance to recover. I spoke to my friend Traysi about the issue, and she suggested the above advice: to let my insides heal. I thought that this was a good suggestion. We had no sex in March. I had no bleeds. I thought I was on the right track and that the respite from intercourse was proving a success.

April unfolded and there were no issues — bedroom fun was

back to normal. I was confident that I would not experience any more signs of blood again. We were having regular fun and hadn't witnessed a single untoward moment. On 29th April though, and at 11 p.m., I had another scare. This time it was nothing related to sex — I went for a wee and wiped blood. I thought this was my period starting, but the next day there was no period. I thought this was a little odd, so I noted it on my calendar as a weird experience. Nothing alarming then happened until 16th May 2020. This is when a huge bleed occurred during sex. Blood was everywhere, fresh red blood all over me. I was extremely worried — this wasn't normal. I stood in my downstairs bathroom washing away all the blood from the insides of my legs, trying to make sense of what was happening to me. My husband was covered in blood too, from me. He tried to calm me down by remarking, "It's surely something simple; try not to worry." His reassurance didn't comfort me, but I finally dropped to sleep.

The next day couldn't come round quick enough. I clock-watched until the clock on the dining room wall read 9 a.m. I picked up the phone and called my doctor's practice. I told my GP every piece of my alarming personal encounter. She didn't seem worried and said, "Mrs Camm, your recent smear test was normal."

Her very words were, "Don't worry, Mrs Camm; it could be many things causing bleeding." Her voice reassured me as I listened to her ideas on the matter down the handset. "See you in two weeks," she said, "and in the meantime, pop for swabs and a few blood tests."

This advice I followed. At the end of May I visited the surgery,

where my GP examined my cervix and didn't seem concerned. As she viewed me internally, she said, "It all looks fine apart from a few white spots on the cervix." My GP referred me to the Royal Derby Hospital for a more thorough cervical check-up called a colposcopy; this is a camera looking at a detailed image of the cervix.

My GP had also assured me as I walked into her consultation room that the blood tests — all three samples she had requested — were all fine and showing no issues. These I'd had taken a week previous at the doctor's surgery. It is a complete mystery to me to this day how these blood tests didn't detect stage 3 cancer in my bloodstream.

On returning home, I read up on the internet about the GP's finding of white spots on the cervix, and was alarmed to discover that this could be a sign of cancer! This was very concerning. What I had found out on the internet unsettled me greatly! I didn't share the information that I had discovered with anybody. It was my personal secret; I didn't want to scare everyone that knew of my problem.

The colposcopy took place on 16th June 2020, which was just over two weeks after attending my local GP practice. At this very appointment the colposcopy at the Royal Derby Hospital unearthed that a biopsy would be required. This is when I knew I was in trouble — they had spotted something gruesome. Why else do a biopsy?

On 3rd July my husband and I drove to the Royal Derby Hospital full of fear and dread. We hoped and prayed for the news

that it would be an easy fix. This was four days before my son's 17th birthday. We arrived at the hospital and, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, I had to go and sit in the waiting room by myself. My brilliant rock and best friend, my husband, had to wait in the corridor outside the waiting area.

There were two ends to the Gynaecology department. These were marked by two double doors on a long wide corridor. I sat and waited by myself, terrible thoughts running through my mind, somehow knowing that after today's results, my life was never going to be the same again, no matter what my biopsy had discovered. I had high suspicions that it was going to be serious — why else would they have taken sample tissue from my cervix three weeks previous?

I had been reading up about my symptoms; it didn't fill me with confidence. I kept these deep concerns to myself, as I have said. I felt so well, and the only symptoms that were present were on-and-off displays of pinkish discharge when going to the toilet. I was not bleeding; I felt really healthy. I was just having to try and keep busy and keep my mind from caving in to the fear that I might have cancer. I'd read on the internet that bleeding during and after intercourse was a sign of late-stage cervical cancer. This is exactly what I had experienced after intercourse on 16th May.

Flick back to the waiting area on 3rd July 2020. The hands on the clock moved slowly; many ladies' names were being called, but not mine. Reception had informed me on arrival that my doctor was running 30 minutes behind schedule. I desperately wanted some news, and swiftly. Sitting and waiting on my own for my

name to be called was my first test of strength; my cancer journey had begun but I was not yet aware of this.

The nurse had spoken to me at check-in and said that somebody would fetch my husband from outside the corridor when it was my turn to see the doctor. My name was called, and I followed a nurse who then said, "Wait here, I'll find your husband for you." She vacated via the double doors to find my support, my husband, but she couldn't locate him. Richard wasn't answering her calls, and she came back through the doors without my rock and friend! She asked a colleague of hers to find my husband as we walked to the doctor's room. Her colleague returned empty-handed too though.

This was all in the space of about four minutes. The nurse asked if I wanted to go back to the waiting room area and sit down until they could find Richard. I replied, "No, let's just get on with it!" The waiting for the news had taken its toll and I just couldn't wait any longer. With a heavy heart, myself and this friendly nurse who had been trying to locate Richard walked into a private consultation room. Opposite me sat a doctor who informed me that the biopsy had found cancer in my cervix, and I was going to need treatment. I asked, "How could this possibly be? I have only recently been for my smear test!" The doctor informed me that I had been carrying cancer for a long time! I was extremely shocked.

My world crumbled in a split second. My only dumbfounded reaction was "Right, okay." I displayed no emotion. My husband then came into the doctor's room; he had been waiting at the other end of the corridor. A totally innocent mistake. Richard looked straight at me as he entered the room, but I exhibited no

expression of what the doctor had just revealed to me.

My rock and best friend sat down next to me and reached for my hand. I held it tight as the doctor repeated the black news to my husband. We were bowled over. We were silent; we couldn't believe the biopsy had discovered cancer — I looked a picture of health. The whole time I was sat on a chair thinking, this is nuts, I've only just recently attended my smear check-up and had a letter saying that I'm totally healthy!

The nurse led us into another consultation room where she spoke about many treatments. Her words were that I would most likely have to have a hysterectomy. The nurse said that the hospital thought that I had at least a 1B cancer. I asked what grade; I had been reading all about cancer every night since my biopsy.

Boom! She crushed my heart with her one swift reply. It was a dagger to my heart. "Grade 3," she said. As I looked at her lips moving, I was thinking back to my research. I had discovered that grade 3 was unpredictable and the most aggressive. The very worst one that exists! That's when the tears came; I couldn't stop crying. My world and my life were never going to be the same again. My husband was sitting beside me, unaware of the cancer grading system.

All I could think of whilst I sat on the chair breaking down was, "My beautiful children and husband... I'm going to die." We walked out of the department holding hands. I was walking away from my health, and it was devastating. We exited the hospital. I was an emotional wreck. My husband ran to fetch the car. Straight away I called my sister and ruined her day.

It seemed serious then on 3rd July: stage 1B, grade 3. The nurse informed me that I would need an MRI and detailed body scan at another local hospital to see if the cancer had spread to my major organs. It was all very frightening and a lot to come to terms with. I attended the City Hospital, Nottingham, to have detailed body scans between the dates of 3rd and 6th July.

On 9th July, myself and Richard both attended the Royal Derby Hospital to receive the detailed MRI scan findings. On this visit the doctor had a full picture of my disease. The doctor informed us both that the cancer hadn't spread to my major organs. We were so happy and relieved as we sat there. I smiled at my husband. A short lapse of time passed as we sat and waited for the doctor to start telling us about the hysterectomy they'd originally suggested that I would probably have to have.

I wish! Out came more devastating news from the doctor's mouth: "Mrs Camm, your cancer is a lot more serious than we first expected. It is actually a 3C cancer, and we say the "C" because it is also in one of your lymph nodes."

"Radical treatment is what we intend to do for your cancer," the doctor said. "Chemotherapy, radiotherapy and a procedure called brachytherapy. If you respond well to the chemotherapy and radiotherapy, then brachytherapy will be the last treatment." I felt so defeated. I felt there was no hope, I felt like that was the end for me in this world. I was also stunned that the doctor was suggesting that brachytherapy would only be possible for me if the other two treatments were successful. It was frightening to accept that the doctor was forewarning me that I might not even get far enough

to receive this invasive procedure called brachytherapy.

My hopes of getting over 1B cancer were now in the gutter. Now I felt that there was a bloody mountain to climb barefooted! It was horrendous. We were silent; the car ride home was like a funeral procession. The car came to a halt as we arrived home. I felt the loss of my mam was unfolding all over again, but it was my life this time on the line due to cancer. My kids, I thought. They're going to see me in a coffin earlier, much earlier than I'd ever imagined. My mind was smothered by this image.

It was a complete nightmare, the pace at which my whole family had to accept that death could be on the cards for me, and the speed at which the rocket launched its danger towards us. On 3rd July I thought I had an 80% chance of survival and on 9th July my survival rate was lowered even more. In the space of six days our family had to accept that I'd got cancer, with a high chance that treatment might fail.

On Monday 13th July the hospital invited me to attend a meeting to talk about chemotherapy treatment. This is the point at which the nurse informed me that I was booked in for chemotherapy the next day! Literally within 24 hours I would be starting my journey. I sat there on the chair, stunned but grateful for the swiftness of my oncologist's request. The next day, Tuesday 14th July, I was sitting in a hospital chair, a cancer patient with a cannula in my hand, the chemotherapy introducing itself along my suffering veins. It was crazy. Once the hospital had viewed my MRI, the treatment plan was a matter of great urgency!

Telling my kids and family was heart-breaking; it was so hard to find any appropriate words that would make it seem less scary.

There were none. For the next two weeks I was in total hell; I'm not even sure how I managed to get through the days to be honest, but we all do somehow when tragedy strikes. Every waking minute I thought of cancer. Every waking minute I didn't know how I was going to accept this mammoth task. Writing it all down makes me do a massive sigh; I can't believe that I'm living to tell the tale. My closest family — Richard, my children and my in-laws — took the route of holding back tears and showing how strong they could be in front of me. I wondered how they managed to do this, but I was so grateful that they demonstrated such a solid dam.

The monstrous news came on a Friday, and then it was the weekend, the longest one I've ever known. It was absolutely bonkers. My body, oh my goodness, it had hidden cancer so well! A massive bleed only on 16th May and now it was 14th July and I was looking at a chemotherapy drip. I went to chemotherapy on my own. The first time, you can take support with you, but I saw no point in wasting six hours of my husband's busy day. I came home from my first chemo session and mowed the lawn! I pill-popped the anti-sickness tablets that the nurses on the chemo ward had administered to me; these were to keep the sickness urges at bay. The next day I felt fine. It was weird.

Through the weeks I worked as usual. My neighbours and my family were stunned. So was I. Could this be beginner's luck? I wondered. Every week passed and there I was, tip-top! Apart from the raging 3C cancer, of course. It was surreal. I would go to sleep crying about my cancer and wake up doing the same thing. I just couldn't see a way out. My darling husband would bring me a cup

of tea in bed and say to me, “Oh, don’t cry.” There was no escaping this horrible mess, apart from by having terrible chemicals introduced into my body.

Tears were in abundance for the majority of the evenings in the first week; I just couldn’t believe my bad luck. Keeping busy was the only thing that kept my cheeks dry.

The flowers flooded in; my dining table looked like a flower shop. People cared and they were loving. The blooms in the vases blessed my house with perfume and beauty but the sight of them did nothing for my heart and mood. It was my friends’ and family’s only way of making their contribution; they all felt so rocked and helpless. Every step taken in my house was with fear and thoughts of black, and there was no treatment plan in the very first week, which was very hard to deal with. The hospital was only able to roughly guess my cancer diagnosis and I was given many leaflets along with a thick booklet to educate myself on what was happening inside my cervix.

This, though, was when I thought the cancer was stage 1B and less of a threat. Little did I know, that first week, that my body was actually the host for late stage 3 aggressive cancer! The 168 hours of no plan, a broken heart and reading all about cervical cancer when I couldn’t sleep through the nights enabled my mind to become very worried but well informed. The more my mind dug for information, the less it helped. As I used my shovel to dig deep into the internet website pages and forums, the pile of dirt I was creating was becoming a mountain beside me.