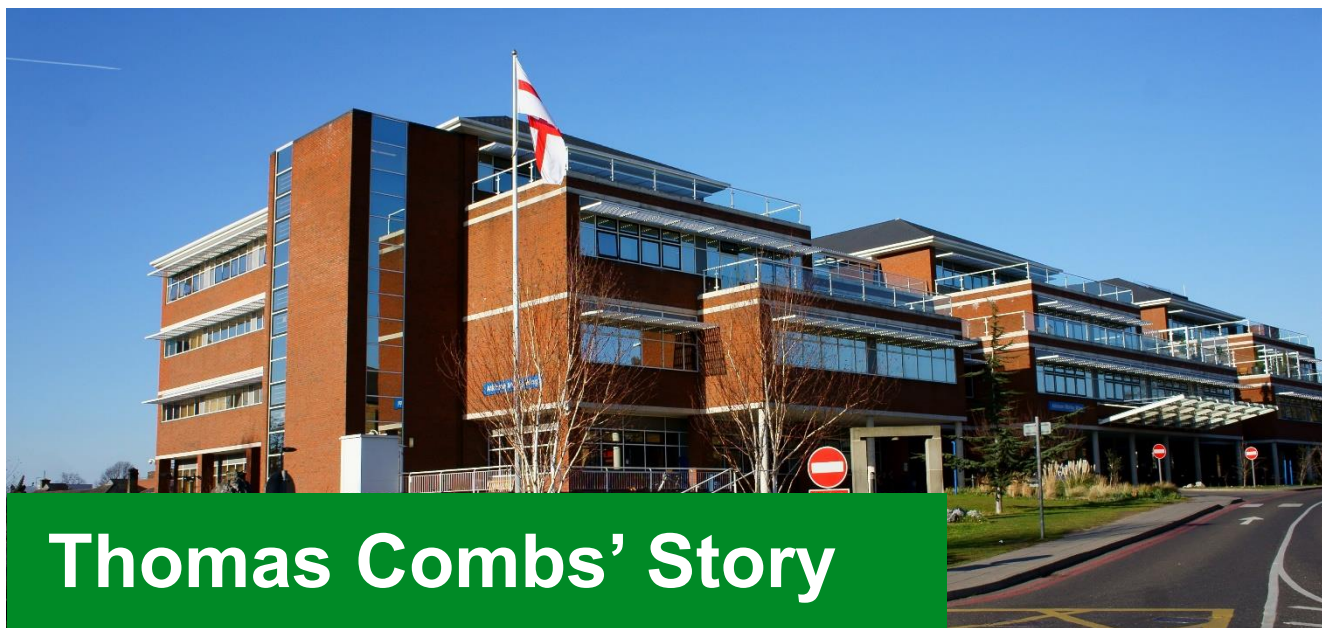


Cancer Connect

The St George's newsletter for people affected by Cancer

Issue #12
March 2025



Thomas Combs' Story

Having lived in South West London all of my life, I've had my fair share of St George's experiences.

Those experiences have ranged from accidents requiring stitches, a rotated broken bone in a hand to the treatment and long recovery following a significant skull fracture and a bleed to the brain.

And more recently, having to face the challenges of a cancerous kidney, its removal followed by eleven months of intravenous infusions to help eradicate any potential remaining cancer from my system. At the time of writing all looks good although I take nothing for granted and still have my psychological fingers tightly crossed.

But my battle with cancer has introduced me to some remarkable individuals. Oncologists, surgeons, radiologists, nursing staff and phlebotomists to name just a few – people who don't just treat you as a hospital or NHS number but rather a person facing their own challenging journey. In the scheme of things, they go beyond what we would generally expect from many a professional. There is a true compassion and empathy within these people and a sincere wish to make things better for those that they help – whether it be in a theatre or in the Trevor Howell Day Unit.

Whilst some may shy away from the idea of a big hospital, I view such hospitals as possessing an enviable depth of resource and expertise when compared to their smaller counterparts – not just one specialist in a certain area of health but often many.

I sincerely thank St George's for all that it has done for me over the years and also, for introducing me to the kind and helpful people of Macmillan Cancer Support.



Céline's Story

'In June 2023, while on holiday in the South of France, my brother noticed a concerning mole on my back. I have pale skin and numerous moles, but this one stood out as darker and larger than the rest. By June 2024, I was diagnosed with Melanoma In Situ.

Melanoma is the most fatal form of skin cancer. While I was relieved it hadn't spread, I was upset that it took a year to have the mole examined and removed.

Upon returning home from my holidays, I quickly visited my GP, who referred me to St George's Hospital's dermatology department within two weeks. In August 2023, a dermatologist examined the mole but didn't see anything alarming. He scheduled a follow-up appointment for November, which got cancelled and pushed to April 2024. I couldn't get anything sooner.

I was initially concerned about the mole, but since it hadn't changed and I didn't have any symptoms, I didn't think it was a cause for worry. I considered myself healthy and had always been careful in the sun, I always used sunscreen and had never used sun beds.

One of my cousins had skin cancer the year before, but since he wasn't a first-degree relative, I wasn't considered at risk.

In February 2024, I ruptured my Achilles tendon and couldn't walk for weeks. This year wasn't going to be my year!

I nearly forgot about my upcoming appointment until I came across an interview with Sarah Ferguson, Duchess of York, who had recently been diagnosed with Breast Cancer, but also Melanoma. Her words, combined with a conversation with my aunt about the seriousness of Melanoma, motivated me to keep the appointment, even if I had to go to the hospital on crutches.

At the appointment, a different dermatologist recognized the mole's irregularity and scheduled me for surgery to have it removed. After another month's wait, I underwent surgery in May 2024. I received the biopsy results a month later: the mole was cancerous, but again, it was 'In Situ' and hadn't spread. Still, it was a shock to hear the word 'cancer'.

I then had a WLE (wide-local excision) to remove the cancer cells completely and the surrounding area of healthy tissue, along with six additional moles for testing. Fortunately, all were benign. Now, with three surgeries and seven scars later, I'm fine but learned to check my moles regularly.

Reflecting on the emotional upheaval, I remember feeling alone and anxious on the day of my second surgery. While waiting at the hospital, I found support at the McMillan centre, where a kind woman named Melanie comforted me over tea. Although I consider myself lucky to have caught the Melanoma early and had great support from my employer who was always accommodating when I needed surgery and recovery time, the long waits for appointments and results were challenging.

I now must be even more careful in the sun, and I hope Melanoma never comes back. I am glad I have been taken care of by the Dermatology team at St George's since, and I also want to raise awareness and if you see a mole that doesn't look right, please get it checked. Had I not listened to Sarah Ferguson and my aunt, and skipped that second appointment, I could be at a different stage in my life today.

- Céline



Verity's Story

On 12th of June 2024 I got a breast cancer diagnosis, I was totally in denial even at our eldest daughter's wedding the next day.

I'm 53 and healthy and have always kept up with mammograms. Why me? It was only when I went for my first of 8 chemo sessions in the Trevor Howell ward at St George's Hospital that reality truly hit me.

It wasn't so much the chemo drugs racing up my veins, but other brave heroes attached to drips like I was. I started to get to know them by name, the beautiful 32-year-old brain cancer girl, the charming man with oesophagus cancer who's sense of humour made me laugh each round. The loud London cab driver who promised to take us all away in his cab for a jaunt in the city. The kind tea lady who cheered us all up with her smiley eyes, sandwiches and tea. Thank you Jackie I would not get through this without you. The chemo nurses Gemma, Sammy and Jeremy who patiently scanned my veins and dripped me, checked up on me over and over throughout each session.

I hear the other patients ringing their last chemo bells and get excited for it to be me soon, but I'm also sad as to leave this nurturing kind ward full of hope, sadness, laughter real life my sanctuary through such a life change as a cancer diagnosis.

Thank you, Trevor Howell ward, for all you have done.

Move your body and eat well

Having a diagnosis of Cancer often seems to come out of the blue. So many of us ask what can I do to help myself? Well, once the shock has been dealt with it could be a good time to re-address our relationship with food and exercise.

A healthy diet and exercise are extremely important to maintain, even after a cancer diagnosis. In tandem with treatment it can be very helpful at relieving stress and pent-up emotions that we often feel when faced with big challenges of life. Exercise has been proven to help strengthen both the heart and the lungs as well as bone strength. Even if we do not have Cancer this is always a good thing to be mindful of.

Exercise can also help with our mental health as it releases endorphins, the feel-good chemical, so it's win-win. If you haven't exercised for a long time, it is important to run this by your doctor first to make sure the exercise program is right for you. There is a range of exercises for everyone at all fitness levels and ages.

In the UK we are lucky to have access to an abundance of fresh fruit and vegetables. Mother nature is generous. There are so many varieties. of beautiful plump delicious fruit, we are spoilt for choice. We can use this fruit to make a delicious smoothie to indulge in.

Here is a recipe for a simple fruit smoothie

(IF YOU ARE DIABETIC BE MINDFUL THAT FRUIT HAS A LOT OF NATURAL SUGARS.)

- 2 cups of frozen or fresh berries,
- 1 cup of natural Greek yogurt,
- ½ a cup of spinach,
- 5 plump juicy strawberries.

Put all the ingredients into a blender and Wizz till smooth and add some ice if desired.

No colours or preservatives - just natural and tasty.

Give it a go!



Jeff Thomson and his amazing support group

Last year we wrote about a patient, Jeff Thompson, who was treated at St Georges for Prostate cancer and has established his own support charity called **Cancer Don't Let It Win**. Jeff had already set up 6 groups who meet regularly in various towns, to support the men and their partners after treatment for Prostate cancer, however there was no support in Wandsworth. So we are thrilled to report that there is now a group that meets on the last Friday of every month in Balham library and all prostate patients and their partners are welcome.

It provides a very comfortable place to discuss and compare notes with others on how to deal with the treatment and live happily with any aftereffects. Everyone who comes, finds it very uplifting and supportive.

Resources

Macmillan cancer information and support centre
Ground floor, Grosvenor wing, St Georges hospital
Tel: 0208-725-2677

Macmillan Cancer support
Help line: 0808-808-0000
Mon-sun, 8am-8pm

Macmillan community cancer link worker Support services
Tel: 0300-1000-200
Macmillan.org.uk

Other advice services

Citizens advice
Tel: 03444-111-444
www.adviceguide.org.uk

Turn2us (Financial support)
www.turn2us.org.uk

National debt line
Tel: 0808-1565-3800
www.nationaldebtline.co.uk

Step change (debt service)
Tel: 0808-138-111
www.stepchange.org

Law centres Network
(free legal advice)
Tel: 020-3637-1330
www.lawcentres.org.uk

ACAS (Advise on workplace rights)
Helpline: 0300- 123-1100
www.acas.org.uk

Age UK
Tel: 0800-055-6112
www.ageuk.org.uk

Voice is the cancer patients/carers user group. We work with the Hospitals Cancer Division to improve the services. Are you interested in representing your community and influence the Future cancer care at St Georges Hospital? Why not join a community of patient volunteers and help make a positive impact. Membership of VOICE ensures you will always be up to date on the latest information on cancer services, be invited to health and wellness events and be able to share your views and experiences. You can also help with fundraising as well as have a hand in designing new services. Interested in joining? visit the Macmillan information and support centre or contact:

Tel 0208725-2677

Email: cancer.information@stgeorges.nhs.uk