

# Cancer Connect

The St George's newsletter for people affected by cancer

Issue 7, July – December 2020



Janice Minter (centre), Macmillan Lead Cancer Nurse at St George's

## We want cancer patients to know that we're here for you

**Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the cancer service at St George's has had to adapt to new ways of working, but throughout it all, the safety of patients has been their top priority. We spoke to Janice Minter, Lead Cancer Nurse, to learn more.**

"The message we've been keen to get out is that we're still open and here for patients" said Janice, "even during the peak we were still doing cancer surgery and chemotherapy."

"We were able to offer virtual appointments, and we reconfigured clinics so patients who had to come in would be safe. We moved the chemo unit temporarily, but I'm pleased to say that it's back on Trevor Howell."

At the peak of the outbreak, some Cancer Nurse Specialists' (CNS) were redeployed to help on Covid-19 wards.

Janice told us: "Our CNS' are trained in communicating with patients and relatives, so they supported our intensive care teams by liaising with families and providing end of life care guidance."

"We did ensure that we always had CNS' here to provide support and reassurance for cancer patients. I've never been more proud of our workforce – they embraced every change and were always there for patients."

Janice and the team plan to continue to reassure both new and existing patients: "Please do come in if your GP has referred you for a scan, or speak to the cancer team if you need more information – we are doing things as safely as possible and we want cancer patients to know we're here for you."

## In this issue....

### Patient Story

Gregory Ricks talks about how support groups can help men address their issues in a way they feel comfortable with.

### Patient Story

Sharon-Ann Gayle: Why Me? My fight for life from heartbreak to hope.



If you would like to make a comment, want more information about any article or have a suggestion for a future article, please email [patient.voice@stgeorges.nhs.uk](mailto:patient.voice@stgeorges.nhs.uk) or contact the Macmillan Information and Support Centre on 020 8725 2677.

## Support groups can help men address their issues in a way they feel comfortable with



Cancer is not just a physical illness. It can have a profound emotional and psychological impact associated with fear, isolation, loss of self-esteem or independence, depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems. Getting to know others who have had similar experiences and feel able to speak about it can be helpful.

This is something Gregory Ricks (73) a St George's Voice patient group member has grown to understand. Diagnosed with bladder cancer in 2007, and three melanomas in 2017, Gregory, an ex-teacher, attended male-orientated support groups as part of his journey.

"Support groups have rounded off my social education. I feel more complete, more enthusiastic. I'm spontaneously challenging my relationships with family and friends. Where I would usually hold back, now I say 'I don't like this', or 'I don't understand why you want to do that'. When I express myself and I'm heard, a revolution arises naturally. I find that amazing."

When asked why he thinks men are often characterised as struggling with speaking about the strain of cancer, Gregory explained, "Traditionally, men have to appear to be strong and are expected to handle difficult situations.

"Men don't realise they want to open up until someone else does it. It's the old herd thing. At the Men at Maggie's West London support group, it's like popcorn. One person pops and starts talking, then another person pops and starts talking. When one starts, others follow suit."

Men are reported to more likely use support groups as fact-finding outlets, asking questions about the disease, treatments and practical issues.

Not all men are the same, but generally men may find it harder to express feelings and fears about cancer. Some use tactics such as humour to deal with their cancer - it doesn't mean they feel things any less powerfully.

Email [patient.voice@stgeorges.nhs.uk](mailto:patient.voice@stgeorges.nhs.uk) with your views on this topic.

Visit [www.stgeorges.nhs.uk/macmillan](http://www.stgeorges.nhs.uk/macmillan) for a list of male-specific support groups.

*Photograph Courtesy of Look Good Feel Better – Supporting Men with Cancer*



## WHY ME? MY FIGHT FOR LIFE FROM HEARTBREAK TO HOPE

In 2015, Sharon-Ann (56) was diagnosed with myeloma, a type of bone marrow cancer, and a rare heart disease amyloidosis. She was told she had up to six months to live and discharged from hospital to spend her final Christmas with family. Five years later, she is still here. Sharon-Ann spoke to us about her experience...

### What was it like when you were told you had up to six months to live?

"I fell on the floor crying. Your life flashes in front of you and nothing prepares you for those words. I started working out dates when I would no longer be here. My husband was very strong, he told me; 'We're going to live our lives as if that's not going to happen.'"

### How does it impact your life now?

"Life is far more precious, but I still cry about those words. I'm glad I'm here because I've been able to help my children through pivotal and important times; my eldest son graduated during Covid-19 and my daughter is in her third year in medical school. I fought for them. I've had to stay positive."

### What helped you stay positive?

"Cancer is a taboo subject in many black, Asian, and minority ethnic communities. No-one wants to talk about it, but I did the opposite. I set up a WhatsApp group with over 50 friends and family, keeping them informed every step of the way. Everyone was supportive with uplifting messages, prayer, and so on.

"I had a book that I confessed anything of joy, things that inspired me, and things that made me feel good. I was very open, I prayed, I spoke to people and I didn't focus entirely on cancer or being an inpatient. I didn't feel alone.

"A commode was brought into my hospital room but I never used it and got up every day.

"At St George's I was under the haematologist Dr Fenella Willis, and the heart failure/cardiologist Dr Lisa Anderson. They worked fantastically together. The left hand knew what the right hand was doing and they paid much care and attention to detail, telling me everything that was happening. They wanted to make sure I was getting the right treatment at the right time.

"I also saw the cancer psychologist at St George's. She showed me how to work out a plan in my life to help me participate in the things my family wanted to do.

"I urge all to find support in any which way they can. There are so many people and charities out there that want to help."

To find out more about Sharon-Ann's heartfelt story and her inspirational book 'Why Me? My fight for life from heartbreak to hope' visit: [www.sagayle.com/](http://www.sagayle.com/).