Lisa Whittaker’s Story

My name is Lisa Whittaker. I have been battling cancer for the past five years. My story began when I was diagnosed with breast cancer, and referred to an oncology specialist. At the time I suspect I was like most other cancer patients, ignorant of the disease, and ignorant of the treatment I would receive.

And frightened to death.

When I met my oncologist for the first time, I remember commenting on the beautiful arrangement of flowers she had sitting on the windowsill.

As I sat down her opening remarks confused me. ‘Some patients love me,’ she said, ‘others hate me.’

What a strange thing to say to a new patient. I thought to myself, and then promptly forgot it.

We spoke for a while and she shared with me the treatment she would administer. I was told that I would be treated with Cyclafocimide and Adriamycin. When I asked about the side effects, she explained that Cyclafocimide was responsible for damaging the reproductive system, and Adriamycin was responsible for hair loss. My heart was hammering in my chest as I told her I wanted to protect my reproductive system so that we could still have a family.

I remember the conversation as if it was yesterday.

‘We’ll see,’ she said.

‘Maybe you don’t understand,’ I replied, ‘I don’t want to jeopardise my ability to have children in any way, I want you to protect my reproduction system.’

I went on to share with her, what I was doing with my naturopath, and how I wanted him to be involved with my treatment. The oncology specialist made no attempt to acknowledge my request, except to remark that my naturopath is not allowed to treat cancer.

As the examination proceeded I again asked what are my options? I was advised that I would need Chemo, and then Radio & HRT for 2years, after the chemo is finished. I asked ‘what if I choose not to do that? She looked at me strangely, and then slammed her diary shut.

‘Then you may as well forget it. You will be dead soon.’ The specialist said.

I was speechless!

‘There is no point worrying about your reproductive system,’ she continued, ‘because you won’t be here long enough to have any children. What’s the point of having a child without a mother?’

I was disgusted. Infuriation, anger, fear and rage coursed through me.

‘Who the hell are you? Telling me I won’t have children.’ I remember replying ‘I’ll tell YOU what were going to do. You and my naturopath will have the east vs. west argument and then we are going to get around this table and figure out how to get me well, my reproductive system intact. Got it!’

To someone who knew so little, her arrogance was astonishing. There was no consideration for what I, the patient wanted. I was so angry. Her response was beyond anything I could have imagined – in 5 minutes she had written my death warrant and told me I was never going to have children. She was not prepared to consider anything else, apart from what she knew. This experience was beyond belief - I had gone to see a specialist in oncology for breast cancer, but was offered treatment, as if I was walking into Auschwitz. There had been no consideration, or acknowledgment of what I wanted. The information I requested was not given. Her position was basically, do what you're told.

I was completely taken aback. Panic was on the rise, as if I didn't have enough to deal with.

Because I knew of no other treatments, I had the chemotherapy and radiotherapy, but under protest. After the 3rd hit, my body began to experience changes. The symptoms, of the early onset of menopause alarmed me. I phoned my naturopath and explained what was happening. He sent me some tonics to protect my body.

I then phoned my referring surgeon and said I wanted a second opinion. At first she was hesitant, even shocked as to why. My anger flared and I told her that the oncologist had the compassion & understanding of a nat. The surgeon referred me to Professor Tattersall, a professor at The University of Sydney.

I was not prepared for the discussion with Professor Tattersall. I sat down and explained what was happening to me. The professor advised there was another option. I was delighted and terrified at the same time. Delighted to hear those words, another option, yet terrified about what damage had already been done.

'You can increase the amount of Adriamycin, and not have the Cyclafocimide.' Professor Tattersall told me. I knew exactly what that meant, as I understood the side effects of both drugs, but my heart still sank, having already endured 3 treatments of Cyclafocimide.

'What is the risk?' I asked.

'An increase of 3 -4 %". Professor tattersall replied

'Does my oncology specialist know about this option?'

Professor Tattersall nodded and replied yes. I burst into tears as this horror movie played over in my head Even so, the professor suggested I finish my treatment with her I refused. I was frightened, confused and scared. I asked Professor Tattersall if he would take my case.

Not only did he agree, but he was also prepared to embrace a joint complementary and conventional approach.

You put your trust in the experts, yet at the end of the day, there is so much they don't know about this disease. When I proposed the use of complimentary medicine to the oncology specialist, a barrier went up.

When you fall ill, you are bombarded with information. Offers of help are made, from psychiatric assistance to crystals. But at the time I could find no- where to source a collaborative approach to *wellness* or education. What happened to choice – my choice – the specialist wouldn't listen to me! I knew my body better than anyone; surely I could help her help me.

Sadly that was not to be the end of my battle.

In October 2003, I found two small pea sized lumps on my left side 1/3 the way down under my arm pit. After several requests from my partner, Gino, we went to have it checked out. Two medical professionals an Oncologist and a Naturopath told me they were just fat deposits. One of them suggested I have a sample taken of a node he had found in my neck. After two botched attempts by the pathology lab using me as a pincushion. I said that's enough and went home.

I was experiencing severe pain in my right side, like something stabbing me in the ribs. Within a month the pea-sized lumps had joined together and grown to the size of a plump date.

We spent Christmas with our family in Italy, and then returned to our life and work in Sydney. I had noticed changes in they way I was feeling, but put it down to the travelling I was doing for my work. I have always been conscious with my food, however, noticed my body wanted clean simple meals. I followed this advice.

By March, the changes in my wellbeing had become more permanent. I started to notice changes affecting my left eye, and right leg and hand. By April I knew something was wrong. I was tired, the lump on my side had turned a ghastly colour, I had a permanent cough, I was eating well, but my body was not feeling well. My intestine seemed to be permanently distended. I had also found a lump in my left breast. I was working in NZ at the time, so I called home to Sydney and made an appointment, without the normal referral, to see the surgeon who had operated on me in 2000.

On a Wednesday afternoon, my surgeon examined me and confirmed what I already knew. I phoned Gino from her office and shared the news. I then made my way home – that was the 7th of April 2004.

I started a diary on the 14 April 04. I took my temperature every morning and noted what was happening: pain in groin, right kidney sore, normally wake without alarm, so tired today, can feel activity in tumour on right side, headache, eyesight seems to be a bit blurred, pins and needles in my right hand and leg all the way to my toes, my right side feels strange.

I found a Chinese herbalist in the city and gave him my history. He prescribed the Chinese herbs that I needed to boil and drink three times a day. The Chinese herbalists' daughter gave me the name of a acupuncturist at the University of NSW and a 'Qi Gong' Master. I also saw a reflexologist, and someone who performed Rieki.

During the next month I went back to school – *for cancer*. I spoke to many professionals about new drugs, I had CT scans and blood tests, to try and understand more about what my body was going through. I read books and articles about other treatments and listened to tapes. The one thing I was determined about was that I would never have Chemotherapy again. Apart from how ill it had

made me feel in 2000, it didn't make sense to inject poison into your body to kill everything. The one thing I had learnt that keeps you strong and well is a healthy immune system.

At this time the diagnoses was not good: liver, lung kidney, left breast now two lumps, an external tumour on my left side, lymph nodes, neck, a moth eaten left hip, lower spine and pelvic area. On top of this I had lost my peripheral vision in my left eye and was unable to walk unassisted.

On May 3rd I went back to my original oncologist. Unfortunately Professor Tattersall was overseas. I wanted to learn about a new drug called Herceptin that had been on trial for 2 ½ years in Australia.

I was read the riot act and told nothing about the drug I was enquiring about. Instead I was told that I needed surgery in both legs and hips to insert metal pins.

'When your bones break, cause they will, we want to be sure you are stable and can minimise the pain, then we will do 'Zolidex' the specialist had said.

She explained that Zolidex suppresses the menstrual cycle so that oestrogen doesn't become an added stimulation to the cancer. If after 6 months, that doesn't work 'we will do Herceptin and Chemo, then radiotherapy and after that you will need to be on HRT for at least 5 years possibly for the rest of your life. And, forget children – out of the question!' I finally received a 2-minute spiel on Herceptin, the drug I had originally gone to enquire about. I was amazed at how calm I was. I said, "Woh, I'm not doing chemo again, it didn't work last time". She just looked at me and said, "well Herceptin doesn't work by itself, and you have to have chemo with it. You're not scaring me" I said, "You should be " was her reply. The rule says that your chances of survival if you choose not to follow this would be around 2 –5 yrs. I took a deep breath and said" I am going to break the rule and introduce to me my children.

It was crazy. So much noise, so much information, and nothing made sense. There were bits and pieces missing, with answers to some questions and not to others. Nothing was coming together, everything was so disjointed the left had no idea what the right was doing. Here I was, trying everything to get well yet needing to become an expert on the disease. It just wasn't working. The jigsaw just was not coming together.

On the 9th May I phoned my dear friend Gay Liddington in Queensland, she new someone who introduced me to Michelle Richmond. In turn Michelle introduced me to Dr.Qi Chen, a Chinese Oncologist who has been practicing Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) for over twenty three years. Michelle offered me several others names of professionals that could assist.

I finished work on the 17th May 2004.

I met Dr Qi Chen on the 19th May 2004, armed with CT Scans, X-rays, fertility results and my diary. A gentle, unassuming man welcomed Gino and I into one of his humble consultation rooms. The walls were full of testimonials. I read every one of them. This is when I realised again; 'there is so much I don't know.

We spoke, we learnt, I cried. Dr Chen was honest with us, which was exactly what I needed. Things were not good he said. Dr Chen didn't say he could heal me, however, he did say that he had patients that have been given 6 months to live and they are still alive a year later. He explained cancer to us and why chemotherapy was good for killing stem cell cancer, but doesn't kill the seed. This is what had returned with such vengeance, he explained. He enquired as to who my oncologist was at RPA (Professor Tattersall) and said that I was in good hands We discussed with Dr Chen the possibility of a combined approach, using the expertise of both professionals. Naturally he was keen. Dr Chen suggested I start Zolidex and Herceptin (an immune-therapy that specifically targets cancer cells. Herceptin is used to treat metastatic breast cancer or HER2 positive breast cancer. It 'masks' the tumours and blocks the cancer that would stimulate tumours. It does not work solo and usually it is prescribed with chemo) at the same time, and as soon as possible. I had my treatment involving acupuncture and meditation. When we finished Dr Chen said he wanted to see me once a week and handed me a bag of pills to be taken 3 times a day.

With my decision was made that Dr.Chen was to be my chief counsellor and with hope restored, we headed home. It was the first time in 6 months that I felt hope. A piece of the jigsaw had locked in. I remember that day, as I sat on our couch and stared at the open fireplace. I made a pact with myself to trust what I felt, to trust my heart. No one knew better than me what my body was feeling. It was quite scary as that also meant there was a possibility I would get it wrong and that outcome was one I could not recover from. I realised death doesn't scare me as much as getting it wrong. Forever learning. *My choice* was to use Chinese herbs and acupuncture. Dr Chen had explained that the Herceptin and Chinese herbs work exceptionally well together. The herbs nourish the immune system and stimulate the "T" cells, the soldiers in your body, and they fight the cancer.

Following my meeting with Dr Chen I met with Prof Tattersall and explained to him what I wanted to do. I asked if he would he work with me, and the other practitioners, using the combined approach. He replied 'whatever it takes, to get you well'.

On the 4th of June we met Michael Trembath and Alistair Gray. Michael is a professional in balancing treatments. He works to align both the physical structure and vibrational balance of the body. Michael studied this technique in India with Mahatma Gandhi's doctor, and now practices and teaches in Sydney, Europe and the USA. Alistair Gray is a practioner in Homeopathic Medicine. A discipline committed to the seamless dynamic health of the mind, the emotions, and the physical body. We spoke for 2 hours. We discussed everything from food to music. Michael said he would like to see me, initially for 2 treatments, then we would scale back to one a week. Alistair prescribed some homeopathic remedies and wanted to see me every 4 weeks.

I had also started seeing Zhao Shihua a Qigong Master. Qigong is an ancient system of exercises that increases Qi (vital energy), bolsters the immune system and unlocks the body innate healing ability. By this stage all 5 professionals knew what was happening and were in contact with each other, to insure the different treatments would all work together.

There was still the issue of the headaches and waning eyesight. I finally got a referral to see a ophthalmologist to have an eye and peripheral examination. Within 2 hrs I was in emergency at RPA for a CT scan on my brain. Seven tumours had found their way to my brain.

The brain took priority over the rest of my failing body. Radiology was considered the only treatment that might have some effect on the tumours in the brain.. Surgery was out of the question, too many tumours, too dangerous.

On the 8th June 2004 I again met with Professor Tattersall and advised him I wanted to start Zolidex and Herceptin immediately. He suggested Zolidex for 6 months, and then Herceptin if there was no change.

‘Why wait,’ I said, ‘I’d like to start this week.’

‘Ok, I will arrange it.’ The professor said

On Friday 11th June we commenced Herceptin. We also met my radio oncologist, the following Wednesday for a planning session. We had the long weekend to prepare mentally for what was about to begin – 2 weeks of radiation. The jigsaw was coming together for me. I felt confident that this was the way to go.

So the plan was 2 weeks of radiation everyday, daily visits for Qi Gong, weekly visits to Dr Chen, plus, taking the herbs 3 times per day, and Herceptin taking us through to July 2004.

This would turn into a book if I shared with you the journey over the months that followed… So I’ll fast forward to September when I took the most recent scans for comparisons;

On September 1st Dr. Chen’s findings showed that the cancer condition in my lungs had improved from hundreds of spots to only two or three. There were also only a few spots remaining in my liver, whilst the kidneys have only some remaining scar tissues. The one in my right 6th rib had completely disappeared. The brain tumours had improved by 80%, whilst my bones had improved by 50%.

Without this combined approach to wellness, I do not believe I would be in remission today.

Lisa Whittaker

Be Brave, Be Courageous and Stay Beautiful