

John Walsh

Australian Senate, Community Affairs, Reference Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to tell you of my experience with cancer some years ago. I believe what you are undertaking is an important initiative in improving the care for people affected by cancer both in terms of medical health outcomes and broader issues such as mental well being.

In August of 1998 I was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour. The tumour was called a glioma and was in an "eloquent" part of my brain. The part which processes written language. It manifested out of the blue as an inability to read. I was operated on in order to ascertain the rate of growth of the tumour. The surgeon delivering the initial prognosis quoted the medical statistics which gave me a 50% chance of surviving for 5 years and a 30% chance of surviving 10 years. The only treatment available was a 6 week course of radiation treatment. I was warned that the treatment was not particularly effective.

The oncologist in charge of the radiation treatment later assured me I had better odds than this because I was relatively young and fit and he explained to me the rationale behind the radiation treatment and why it would work. I mention the two diagnoses because on the one hand the surgeon provided me with the pragmatic, straight down the line numbers which reduced my wife to tears while on the other hand the oncologist provided me with reasons for hope.

I received the radiation treatment over a six week period and in the same period I formulated my own plan for surviving. I was well motivated to stay alive having three children ages 6, 4 and 2 at the time.

Intrinsically I knew that I was in a large part responsible for my own predicament due to the stress I had been subjecting myself to in relation to work and some health issues my eldest daughter was facing in the period prior to the diagnosis. I also knew that it was my mind, my thinking that lead to the high level of stress and that one way to avoid this was to meditate. I was also brought up in a fairly religious family and prayer was recourse I sought when things got a bit tough. So my strategy was to be a three pronged attack on the cancer. Meditation, prayer and radiation treatment.

During the initial 6 month period after the diagnosis several people mentioned to me the Gawler foundation as a place providing help to people diagnosed with cancer. I was strangely reluctant to attend a program telling myself I had a strategy and didn't need help. I was also fairly determined to do anything that would improve my chances of survival so in the end I attended a 10 day residential program at the foundation. The Gawler program aims to provide patients with tools and knowledge enabling them to have a major input to their own outcomes. These include meditation techniques, knowledge of diet useful to anyone suffering an illness and importantly for me the program provides a supportive environment to look at deeper emotional issues affecting patients, their stress levels and hence their immune systems.

The meditation reinforced what I was already doing and enhanced techniques available to me. The diet is a wholesome vegetarian diet which I still largely follow 6 years later. For me however the uncovering of a stress which I was completely unaware of was probably the most important outcome of the program. With the help of the program and an intuitive counsellor I uncovered a deep seated anger directed at my father. This anger had become obvious with the benefit of hindsight but at the time I was completely unaware of it. This along with the stresses from work and my concerns for my daughter were in combination enough to have my immune system at an all time low, opening the opportunity for cancer to spread. In the period prior to the diagnosis if there was a cold going around I would catch it and it would take me a long time to get over it. These days I fair better than most on this score.

Around the time of the program (six months after the cancer diagnosis) I had another scan and the surgeons diagnosis was that the tumour had not grown. I thought well at least I'm holding my own. Following the Gawler program I felt better than I had in many years. I continued my daily meditation and was reasonably rigorous in following the diet.

Six months after the program and 12 months after the diagnosis I had another scan. The surgeon again informed me that the tumour had not grown. Looking at the scan myself the affected area seemed smaller. When I asked him about this he agreed that the comment from the radiographer was that it did indeed appear to be smaller. I told the surgeon what I had been doing and the Gawler program. He said he was aware of the program but had known people who had attended and still died and his parting comments were "If swinging on the clothesline makes you happy, do it". I was convinced now that I was on the right track. I attended a follow up program at the Gawler foundation eight months after the initial program. In this program via similar techniques I uncovered and largely laid to rest a pathological fear of

dying. Not so much dying in fact as having to say goodbye to my young children. Another burden shed. After this program I was feeling better than I had ever felt in my life. Shortly afterwards I had another scan, some two years after the initial diagnosis of the tumour. I was nervous yet hopeful on going to get the results of this scan. A good result meant again my strategy was working. If the result was poor I didn't know what else I could do.

On greeting me the surgeon he asked how I was. I responded that I was very well apart from some stress relating to the scan results. His response was that there was nothing to worry about on that score. In fact the tumour had completely disappeared with only the scarring from the craniotomy to indicate it had ever existed. I think he was more than a little surprised. He said I could have a follow up scan in 12 months if I liked but there was probably little point. I haven't been back.

There is no way I or anybody else can apportion my excellent result to the radiation or the meditation or the prayer or the Gawler foundation. It is my feeling that each played a significant role in my healing. It is my strong belief that Gawler program and the changes in my attitudes, practises and beliefs have laid the foundations for ongoing well being and the opportunity to live a life without fear of the recurrence of the disease. I feel as if I have addressed the major causes of the cancer and therefore have little need to fear recurrence.

As a result of my experience I believe it would be a great help to people diagnosed with cancer to be offered and recommended to take up as part of their treatment ways to address the psychological side of the disease, to deal not only with the fear of the disease itself but with those underlying fears which contribute to ill health. It would aid their capacity for healing and reduce the chances of recurrence of the disease. I am also aware that most of the people attending the Gawler program when I did it were there as a last resort having tried all the available conventional techniques with little or no success. As a result many of them were so ill there simply wasn't enough time for their bodies to recover even with the benefits of the program. This scenario obviously skews any statistics coming out of the program.

A research program is always going to be difficult with a disease such as cancer which has such a multifactorial range of causes. Anecdotal evidence such as mine doesn't prove things scientifically but I know what is true for me. I believe I have had the best of both worlds in my cancer experience. I had a supportive oncologist with the radiation treatment and I was fortunate enough to have the Gawler foundation and its support to continue my healing.

In order for others to be as fortunate as I have been the cost of attending these programs would need to be made more affordable. Government funding of programs such as those provided by the Gawler foundation would go a long way in reducing these costs making it easier for people to choose a path which allows them to take some responsibility for their own recovery. In the end this may be the most cost-effective way of treating people with cancer.

I hope my story adds some weight to idea that given the right conditions we can individually make a big difference to our own health outcomes. I wish the committee well in its investigations of this most important issue.

Best regards,

John Walsh