

‘Somebody saved my life – you could do the same’

Paul Golding (Forest 1991-96) describes his experiences of having leukaemia and explains why it is so important to support the Anthony Nolan Trust



Paul relaxes during a walk in Surrey. He is sporting an Epsom 1st XI hockey shirt

I am going to ask you to join the Anthony Nolan Bone Marrow register to become a potential bone marrow/stem cell donor, and this is why:

In April 2010 I took what I thought would be a week off work with a toothache and a mild spring flu bug. After a week at home I went to the doctors and had a quick blood test. Forty eight hours later I had been diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukaemia and admitted to isolation at St George's Hospital in South West London, and put on chemotherapy 24 hours after that.

That may be an abrupt start to an article, but it was an even more abrupt change to my life. It was very much unexpected. I have no family history of cancer, I have never smoked and have always done loads of exercise.

I was 32 and I knew very little about leukaemia. I had heard that it was common in children and it took me the first week to learn how to spell leukaemia properly. I can't imagine how a young child is expected to absorb the awful ramifications of a disease when they can't spell it either.

For those of you that do not know, leukaemia is a cancer of the bone marrow and because bone marrow produces it –

the blood. In my case, my bone marrow was producing immature white cells which could not function properly. I remember studying Biology at Epsom with Messrs Hobbs, Woodward and co and from my distant memory even I knew how important the white cells were. Without treatment I was told that I had no chance of survival.

My first treatment was chemotherapy. There are many types of chemotherapy. This isn't a textbook so I will not go into them all but mine was given to me as a fluid through a 'Hickman line'. This is a white tube that is permanently inserted through your chest and delivers fluid directly to the heart so it is quickly delivered around the body.

The best way to describe it is that it looks like an iPod cable going into your chest. Sadly it doesn't pick up Heart FM. I spent five months in an isolation ward – as both the leukaemia and the chemo reduce the body's immune system. It was an extremely rough period. I became physically very ill and extremely tired. This was exacerbated by the mental challenge of both isolation and uncertainty relating to the outcome of the treatment.

I now know that there can be some positive side effects from cancer – but they do not come easily. In my case it did provide me with a clarity relating to what is really important in my life, and a belief that everyone has their own ‘mechanism’ of coping with life-changing circumstances. The important thing is to find that mechanism. If you want to help someone going through such a tough time, try and help them find their way of coping.

My way of coping was to understand what was within my control, and what wasn't. If it was outside my control, then I made a conscious effort to not let it consume my efforts or my energy. If something was within my control then I would do everything possible to improve my situation.

By way of examples – I could not change the fact I had cancer. Therefore I tried to accept it as quickly as possible, and not use up energy hoping it would go away. I could not simply stop the anxiety or fear just by telling myself to stop feeling emotions, therefore I just accepted the feelings and focused on what was within my control.

On the other hand I could control how I chose to act each and every day. I chose to listen to relaxing music, made an effort to interact with the doctors and nurses, and, wherever I could, continue to find the comedy in everyday life. You would be surprised, as I was, how much comedy there is in everyday life if you chose to look for it.

Fortunately for me, after a second phase of chemo my leukaemia was beaten into remission. Remission indicates there are no further signs of the cancer. However, as with many cancers there is a chance of a relapse.



Paul climbing a glacier in New Zealand

To reduce the chances of this (and to treat some people who cannot achieve remission for leukaemia) there is another procedure beyond chemotherapy. This is to kill off your body's bone marrow and replace it with stem cells from a donor. This replaces your bone marrow with stem cells from a matched donor that is healthy. In addition if the leukaemia returns it can help fight the leukaemia. So where on earth does one get stem cells from?

The Anthony Nolan Trust (www.anthonolan.org) runs a register for people willing to donate stem cells/bone marrow. I was lucky enough to have a match on this register – but not everyone is so lucky.

Donating stem cells can be as easy as having a short series of injections and then having a certain amount of stem cells taken from your blood.

You can register by post – simply by

providing a saliva sample in the mail. Obviously you need to get appropriate kit from the Anthony Nolan Trust (see details at the end of this article). Just spitting into an envelope and sending it in doesn't really work for them, and the postman isn't going to be best pleased!

Some statistics state that 1 in 3 people will be directly affected by cancer in their lifetime. If you, or anyone you know, is diagnosed with leukaemia, or would like a friendly ear to talk with someone who has been through the horrible journey, please feel free to get my details from the OE Club and I would be delighted to help in any way I can. (OE Club: 01372 821294. email: oeclub@epsomcollege.org.uk)

But I am not a doctor. I cannot, and will not, pretend to have any easy answers or miracle cures. And I can almost guarantee

that other people's experience of leukaemia and cancer will differ greatly from mine. But I would like to be there to help as others were there to help me.

Most importantly please, please think about registering for the Bone Marrow register and encouraging all your friends and family to do the same. You could save someone's life.

■ ANTHONY NOLAN TRUST

Anthony Nolan
2 Heathgate Place
75-87 Agincourt Road
London NW3 2NU

Website: www.anthonynolan.org
General enquiries: 0303 303 0303
Fundraising enquiries: 0303 303 3000
