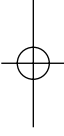




Introduction



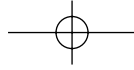
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As a health journalist I thought I knew a lot about cancer and my own chances of getting it. Looking around my long-lived, relatively cancer-free family I blithely assumed I was safe. It's true that my father died of lung cancer at the age of 59, but that was after a lifetime – starting at 13 – of chain-smoking. Oh, and his sister died of cancer, but she was also a very heavy smoker, so I never felt that counted either. I concentrated, instead, on the fact that all four of my grandparents lived well into their 80s or 90s, and that my mother is a miracle of fitness who survived a major car crash on a bridge holiday in France a couple of years ago at the age of 87 without a broken bone.

Well, I was wrong. I was sitting in the bath one Saturday night in March 2002 when I felt a shooting pain in my right breast. It felt – in retrospect at least – as though I was following a neon arrow pointing to The Lump. At first I thought I must be mistaken. But no, it did seem like a definite lump. That night I slept fitfully and every time I woke I reached again to feel for it, hoping that perhaps I had been mistaken. It was an agonising wait until Monday morning, when I went to the GP as an emergency appointment.

He was very kind. A bad sign, I thought. 'It doesn't feel like a bad lump,' he said. But nevertheless he said he would fax the consultant at the local hospital and I should get an appointment within two weeks. Two weeks. Two weeks sipping cold white wine by a pool in the south of France is no time at all. This was two weeks sitting in the dentist's chair with the drill whirring in my mouth. At the end of the first week I was an emotional wreck and rang the hospital to see when I could see the consultant. A pleasant-sounding receptionist assured me they had the letter and if it was considered urgent I would be seen as soon as possible. I just started quietly weeping, unable to control myself and unable to answer. I put the phone down. Half an hour later she rang and said they realised how distressed I was and



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the consultant would see me the following day. So that's how the long journey began. My cancer was malignant, but thankfully very small and there was no trace of it in the lymph nodes. I had a lumpectomy, followed by radiotherapy. The receptionist's kindness and understanding was typical of the treatment I received from everyone in the following weeks. I'm a seasoned complainer about poor service, but you won't hear me knock the NHS or the people who work in it.

I coped with my own diagnosis by reading everything I could find, trawling through the internet for information, and by talking to my family and friends. This book contains both facts and figures and the perspective of people who have experienced the different diagnoses and forms of treatment. This book aims to provide the sort of information and support that I was looking for. I hope that it will be a useful resource for others who have been diagnosed with breast cancer, as well as for their family and friends and for health professionals who come into contact with them.

