“Take care please”

Mr David Donnison

“To rest the voice for two weeks is an inconvenience; to lose it permanently is a b…”

It started in August 1992 – a prescription for laryngitis didn’t work. From there I stepped on to a moving pavement, which first halted in front of a consultant equipped with a long-handled mirror. I’d no idea my tongue could be stretched down as far as my chest!

Next stop en route was a light on a winding tube threading its way through my anaesthetised left nostril, which revealed a small infection on the left side of my voice box. I stepped back on the moving pavement and continued on my journey with the consultant’s parting words echoing in my head: “I’ll have a closer look under general anaesthetic and take a small piece to see what it is”. Maureen, my wife and life-long travelling companion, could see that my casual approach so far was beginning to disappear.

The biopsy was clear but I would be kept an eye on, and seven months later my travels restarted. In the interval my voice was a little better, which was cheering, but I returned to the clinic for another winding light waving around in my larynx. Amazingly I could have my own light and have a look around too! Still infected but not bad. For almost a year my voice varied – sometimes normal, sometimes squeaky – and two further clinic visits in that time revealed nothing sinister.

But – and it was a big but – after 18 static months the moving pavement revved up to breakneck speed. Another biopsy had revealed cancerous cells; it was the first time I’d heard that term and my stomach knotted. Two weeks of absolute silence and careful control of my imagination followed. I raced along, with Maureen, through the confirmed malignancy diagnosis and an X-ray scan of my neck. My consultant was a comforting presence, explaining clearly and kindly what the next steps on the journey were – radium treatment for several weeks with a 60% chance of a complete cure.

We went on our booked holiday and my daughter and her fiancé announced a wedding date in eight months’ time. I desperately wanted to give the traditional father of the bride’s speech for her.

Another chest X-ray, more mirrors and lights and now curious symptoms including an itching left ear and coughing attacks. Worse was to come. On the left side of my voice box a large white growth had shown up on a TV monitor. Hiding beneath this growth was the tumour. The sight of it made me want to start my treatment straight away, within the next two minutes if possible!

Everything was moving very fast now, through the making of a plastic mould to hold my head still during radium treatment and final measurements taken to ensure the radium hit the target. Two and a half years after that first prescription for laryngitis I began 32 consecutive days of radium therapy. The clinic was always very busy – I had the blackly humorous thought that cancer seemed to be a growth industry.

I’d been well prepped about how the treatment was delivered, but the reality of the flat steel bed with the rubber mattress and the shield clamped over my neck and chin was still unnerving. The sound of the door clanging shut behind the technicians, the sudden silence, the whirring sound of the activated rays together with creeping claustrophobia under the mask tested my self-possession – 35 seconds one side, 35 seconds the other, then it was over.

I coped – I thought of it like going to work, including the annoyance of not being able to park easily! The radium therapy brought with it violent coughing fits and difficulty swallowing. Taking painkillers some time before eating helped a lot, but the coughing was relentless. The consultant explained that my throat tissue was being burnt by the rays, and I didn’t doubt it for a minute!

The 32 difficult days came and went, the kind and concerned staff assured me the treatment had gone well and now we would wait for things to heal and hope it had been successful. Lots of positivity and optimism, no weight loss, although extreme weariness. The coughing subsided and the hurt throat eased, but not completely. My voice was just as bad. The optimism was misplaced: the treatment had failed.

My consultant was reassuring: all was not lost, but I had my doubts about that. Another biopsy. At such times diverting oneself is protection against fear. The theatre nurse was coughing and explained she had a frog in her throat. I quipped that I knew a man who could remove it and that he was in the next room. Gratifying laughter all round.

My doubts were confirmed when the biopsy results showed that the next step on that endlessly moving pavement would be major surgery. The tumour was still there, and at best I could expect to lose half my voice box leaving me with some speech. At worst I might lose it all. My consultant wanted to get on with it quickly, but there was the wedding and that speech. I made it, and the day after everything began – myriad tests, visits from a jolly anaesthetist, dietician, physiotherapist, speech therapist and consultant. I was fine until I waved off Maureen and my son; apprehension gripped me, I wrote to my family and I prayed.

In theatre I tried to think of something profound to say, my “last words”. I couldn’t! I drifted into unconsciousness and the loss of my natural voice.

Visiting someone you love after they’ve had major surgery is a shock – the tubes, drains and drips, oxygen mask, monitoring equipment, etc, are frightening. I was too tired to care!

In the following days I faced the psychological hurdle of having lost my whole larynx. I was hardly ever alone – the dietician fitting a food bag via the hole in my neck, the nurses sucking debris from my lungs with a machine, blood tests, the speech therapist encouraging me to try to make noises. It was exhausting but I felt well and cheerful. I scribbled away with pad and pen to communicate. Nice things happened – my wonderful 58th birthday party on the ward, my first bath, the removal of stitches and clips, and a lunch outing to my home, all of which strengthened me psychologically for the fitting of the speech valve. That wasn’t an easy procedure, at least for me – working out how to force pressure through the valve to create “speech” took practice.

With district nurse aftercare in place I went home. I’d finally stepped off the moving pavement treatment journey. I wrote on a card to all the staff at the hospital that I was “speechless” with admiration for all their care and kindness.

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