

'Positivity's my wonder drug'



Me in hospital

Lying in my hospital bed after a devastating diagnosis, I decided how I dealt with it was up to me.

By Jacqui Drake, 62

until one day I noticed I had a large lump in the place where the mole had been removed.

I thought it might just be a harmless cyst and, as it wasn't causing me too much bother, I wasn't worried.

But after seeing my GP, tests revealed it was another melanoma. This time I had surgery and chemotherapy.

But when a third melanoma appeared, I was sent for a scan and the results were devastating.

The cancer had spread to my right lung.

'I'm sorry to tell you it's stage four cancer,' he said gravely. 'It means it's incurable.'

'Can you repeat that?' I asked, thinking I must have misheard him.

But I hadn't. Suddenly, I felt

as if my entire world was crashing down around me.

I felt well and, besides the lumps, I had no symptoms. So it was hard to accept there was something very wrong with me.

Thankfully, it was operated on the swiftly and I was given the all-clear.

Seventeen years passed with no further problems,

knew how hard it was going to be for them to hear this news.

Seeing them upset was almost worse than finding out myself.

Shortly after, I began chemo to target the tumour in my lung. But it was growing so quickly my doctor told me the only option was to remove my right lung completely.

'If we don't, you won't live past a year,' he said.

From then on, I was hit with one health struggle after another. I was hospitalised several times with colitis and a rare form of pneumonia called

pneumocystis, where I needed intensive treatment to save my life.

However, while each time was a struggle, I refused to let it define me.

Lying in hospital, I had a lot of time to think and reminded myself what a positive person I was and how much faith I had in the



With staff at Leeds Cancer Centre

A fundraiser for my charity

treatment I was getting from the NHS.

Despite my diagnosis, I still felt as if there was going to be light at the end of the tunnel.

'We're all terminal, technically,' I'd chuckle with the nurses.

I often joked that staying positive was my 'wonder drug' and helped to keep me going.

One of my doctors said, 'If we could bottle your positivity, cancer patients would do better.'

When I was able to, I still carried on working as a choreographer, with my dancers visiting me while I was in hospital to work on routines.

One day, as I pondered everything that had happened and how I'd been able to react to it, it got me thinking about how I could turn something negative into

a positive. And that's when an idea hit me.

I decided to set up my own charity, Jacqui's Million, with the aim of raising a million for Leeds Cancer Centre, where I'd been receiving my treatment.

My hope was that the money could be used to help make other people's cancer journey a little bit more comfortable and positive.

'I want people to live their best and fullest life, irrespective of their diagnosis,' I explained to Mum and Dad.

'That's an amazing idea,' they said.

Although I knew setting my target at a million was a huge challenge, I'd never been one to do anything by halves.

When I told people what I was up to, the donations soon started rolling in. And feeling better, thanks to starting

immunotherapy right after setting up my charity, I was able to really throw myself into some fundraising efforts.

I staged musical productions where all of the ticket sales went to the charity, I sold branded merchandise and even did a sponsored abseil.

As Jacqui's Million took off, I was invited to do public speaking and even started my own podcast, called *Cancer Journeys*, where I interviewed people who've been affected by cancer in some way.

Earlier this year, I hit the halfway mark with my fundraising, which was incredible and astounding.

I put all my time and effort into it, but it never feels like work because I'm so passionate about it.

Every penny raised goes towards patient-focused care.

'I just want people to have a comfortable experience when they're going through cancer,' I explain, whenever I'm asked about the charity.

So far, the money has funded 10 scalp-cooling machines to stop chemo patients losing their hair, as well as comfortable reclining chairs for patients while they have their treatment.

As well as supporting the recruitment of a bereavement nurse for a year, we're currently funding a play specialist role for children having treatment too.

And we've even covered the costs of refurbishing a family room at the hospital which people can use to be close to a loved one during their treatment, alongside many more projects.

Knowing that every penny helps someone in a tangible way, drives me on because I know I am making a real difference.

I love giving peer support when I visit the hospital, hoping that my own journey inspires others to believe they can also live a good life with cancer.

It's such a scary diagnosis,

especially when it's terminal, and the prospect of treatment can be overwhelming.

However, I try to show them there is always hope.

Over the years, I've won awards for my fundraising. But what matters most to me is hearing from people whose lives have been changed by my story, and the money I have raised.

I was told about one woman who'd received a terminal cancer diagnosis like me, was planning to refuse treatment.

She was worried it would prolong her life, but she'd be too poorly to enjoy it. But

when she heard about me, and how I'm still here 12 years after also getting that news, she changed her mind.

That meant so much to me.

Jacqui's Million has become my vocation and legacy.

If you'd told me all those years ago that I'd be living such a full life, I'd never have believed you.

However, setting up the charity and working so hard on the fundraising has given me a purpose. Who knows, maybe when I reach my first million, I can become Jacqui's Millions and keep going.

The sky's the limit!

● To find out more, visit jacquismillion.com



Me now