

Milestone – II

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Eleven months have now passed since I underwent major surgery and radiotherapy for carcinoma of the tongue. I returned to work nearly seven months ago and have been full time for the past four months since the beginning of January 2006. At present I am still off the 'on call' rota and pondering whether to return or to accept a 5% salary cut. At 58-years-old the latter would be the logical choice. Even after 11 years in post I still live 27 miles away although the drive time from the hospital is only about 30 min. Also my ITU skills are decidedly rusty.

Hospice care

Contrary to what people, both lay and medical think, hospices are now NOT places to which you only go to be cared for at the end of life. Modern treatment of cancer has turned it into a chronic condition in many cases. I am still continuing to benefit from the supportive therapy provided by Paul Bevan House in Ascot.
(www.thameshospicecare.org.uk).

I have now joined the alternate Wednesday evening 'back to work group'. During this time one has some relaxing foot massage, does a bit of pottery, has soup and sandwiches and also very open conversations with other members of this club to which one does not want to belong!

Some of my new friends find their relationships with cancer specialists not easy – for example 35-year-old Mary who has a recurrence of NHL after about eight sessions of chemo asked her oncologist about prognosis: the reply was 'you may see your children grow up but not your grandchildren'. The doctor then burst into tears. This reaction was not helpful!

People, myself included, often have difficulty remembering what is said during what can be a personally devastating consultation – perhaps the use of tape recorders should be promoted and encouraged?

Energy levels

These are returning and I seem able to cope with potentially challenging situations. For example, a recent phone call from a consultant colleague during a private gynaecology list informing me that a competent staff grade anaesthetist had initially failed to insert a spinal needle for an elective Caesarean section and then had been unable to intubate so had woken the patient up – they would like me to come and have another attempt at the spinal. Fortunately the needle went in at the first attempt one space above previous puncture marks, using a 19G needle as a longer introducer than found in the spinal pack (*B. Braun*). Remarkably the patient, whom I had seen in my Obstetric Anaesthesia Assessment Clinic five days before, seemed completely unperturbed and thanked me profusely after her successful surgery!

Legacy

As a result of radiotherapy damage I still have no saliva or taste for food and sadly wine has to be diluted 50% with water if it is not to sting. I have no beard over most of my face except the point of my chin and upper lip so shaving is limited to a quick buzz with an electric razor. These were all side effects of radiotherapy.

My dentist has doubled my 'Denplan' payments as the risk of caries is much higher without the bactericidal effect of saliva. But my skin has healed well, dramatically different to a year ago (fig 1).



I am now off all medication including zopiclone (Zimovane) sleeping tablets which I stopped on 31st December after nine months.

My excellent GP Barry, always said 'don't worry we will get you off it when the time is appropriate'. On Feb 1st I threw away the remaining pregabalin (Lyrica) tabs which I had taken for seven months for phantom tongue pain. Over these months I had gradually reduced the daily amount of both these medications.

A sign of my continuing journey towards 'normality' is that I am now back to organising various trips/events. When you are very unwell there is a natural tendency to become very introverted and a slave to your own medical problems.

January – One afternoon I visited the radiotherapy unit at St Luke's Cancer Centre in Guildford to give the staff, who had treated me six months ago, a present of some bottles of champagne. They were very surprised to see me as it is apparently very unusual for anyone to return for purely social reasons.

I organised a two day pheasant shooting trip to Scotland with seven medical colleagues and friends (fig 2). We had two excellent 100+ bird days at Southesk and Inverieghy Estates. Memories included a remarkable shot which killed a long hen bird behind, while I accidentally fell over backwards. This action must have speeded up my swing at the critical moment!



Fig 2. The shooting party

Also a German colleague who 'took no prisoners' as far as pheasants were concerned even shooting one in front at knee height! A tactful reprimand was required.

February: Unable to be in Scotland for the actual day of my mother's 80th birthday, I organised a second party for her and 50 of her special friends including two of her disabled



Fig 3. My right foot

riders and Marilyn who was born with no arms and used her right foot to eat and drink (fig 3) (my mother was awarded an MBE in 1999 for her work for the Riding for the Disabled). This was at the highly recommended Castleton House Hotel near Glamis. (www.castletonglamis.co.uk).

We are a very democratic family as we run a two party system!

March - Organised a belated silver wedding anniversary for my wife and I. This was in fact six months late because in August 2005 I was still unwell and my father in law had died unexpectedly – not a good time for a celebration. The original idea was to send an email inviting a few friends to join us for dinner on Friday 10th and Saturday 11th March in Madrid.

But numbers spiralled and on each evening over 30 friends joined us firstly at an excellent paella restaurant and then on the second day at the delightful El Neru (fig 4)



Fig 4. Party in El Neru

These successful events were organised by my cousin James (www.adventurousappetites.com).

The majority of our group stayed at the comfortable and very central Carlos V Hotel. (www.hotelcarlosv.com).

What a vibrant city Madrid is bathed in sunshine, friendly people (who don't seem to need any sleep), great food (so I was told), impressive cultural experiences like the Prado Museum where we were happily Goya'd out (fig 5) after two hours!



Fig 5. Goya at the Prado

The only slip-up of the weekend was arriving for a church service at the website indicated time of 10.30 am to be almost immediately handed the collection plate. A service which had in fact started 30min earlier finished 10 min later.

April – Annual Skiing party to Saas Fee in Switzerland which my wife and I had missed in 2005 because of the start of radiotherapy.

This was the 17th successive year in the Hotel Elite (www.elite-saas-fee.ch) run by the charming Sybille Anthamatten (fig 6). Fantastic



Fig 6. Elite Sybille

powder snow, plenty of sunshine, excellent food, and the company of 41 friends and relatives. My younger sister, who had a mitral valve repair

at the Brompton only nine months before, was a living testimony to her surgeon's skill, skiing hard all day and partying every night.

The 'Party Thomson' was so successful that everyone who can wants to return next year during the last week in March.

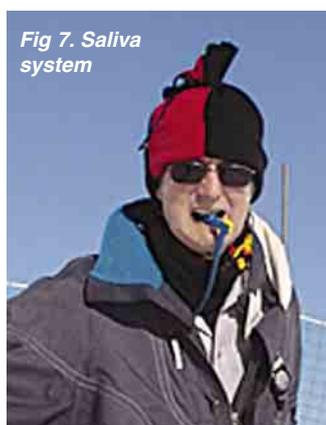


Fig 7. Saliva system

My skiing ability proved to be no worse than in 2004 but I was worried about my

mouth becoming very dry at high altitude due to the absence of saliva. This problem was solved by sips of water from a *Camelpac* worn underneath my ski jacket to prevent freezing (fig 7) and also the use of saliva replacement gel (*Biotene*).

One of the others in my ski class was Stephen, a craniofacial surgeon from Birmingham who was a friend of Cyrus who operated on me – the medical world is really quite small.

Two days before our return my mother had a hip replacement performed at a hospital in Windsor by my good friend Jonathan. Five days post –op she became febrile and tachycardic. I had to take blood and insert a Venflon cannula for IV antibiotics as the RMO was turning her arm into a dartboard!

Future Plans

At the end of the April I am off to Monrovia in Liberia to work on board the *Mercy Ship Anastasis* (www.mercyships.org) for the 16th and last time.

The ship is being scrapped in favour of the *Africa Mercy* which was commissioned on April 6th on Tyneside in the presence of Norma Major, Lord McColl and over 200 guests from all over the world including the wife of the newly elected vice president of Liberia. The new ship intends to continue the work in that needy country started by the dedicated crew of the *Anastasis*.

I'm planning to recommence my normal summer sporting activities like fly fishing and target shooting. I hope to travel to the USA in August to see my son at the end of an attempt on 'the 48' – trying with his university friends, including world-renowned mountaineer, Jake Meyer (www.jakemeyer.co.uk) to beat the current record of 30 days for climbing to the highest point of the 48 mainland states of the Union. This does not include Alaska and Hawaii.

In November I am planning to visit Australia to see my Sierra Leonean friends who migrated there in May 2005 and now live in Wollongong an hours drive South of Sydney (fig 8).



Fig 8. Conteh family in Australia

In 1993 in Freetown at the Princess Christian Hospital I paid for Catherine Conteh to have a Caesarean section after she had been in obstructed labour more than four days. The story was told in my article 'Sun, Sea but not much 'Sux' in Sierra Leone' which was kindly referred to by Wendy Scott in her editorial in the last edition of this journal.

Final Word

Medical staffing seven months ago suggested that I should take early retirement but that is not for me – I wanted to make that decision and not let my illness be in control. My predicted five year survival rate is over 80% from all causes of death but in a way that is meaningless – only the future will tell if the 'big C' returns to claim me.