

Patient Case Study (14) John Switters

KILLING  *cancer*

John switches roles: from saving lives with the British Red Cross, this time he's hoping the powers will help him

John Switters is pretty savvy about the health world. As one of the British Red Cross Emergency Planning Officers for London, he led the capital's team responding to the London bombings in 2005. He's trained to deal with any possible emergency.

Despite all of his experience, he admits to it feeling rather odd to find that this time he's the patient.

He also doesn't understand why the Department of Health and cancer charities are not 100 percent behind the experimental treatment that he says is the only option that can help save his life.



When he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in the summer of 2009, John knew the score and of his long-term survival chances. As with the majority of patients, his cancer is currently inoperable due to growing around a main artery.

Yet John is a fighter, and is prepared to take any risk and try any new or experimental procedure. For him and the other 7,999 a year diagnosed with the cancer, the hope that the cancer can be shrunk back enough for the surgeons to be able to remove the cancer with a degree of safety.

He knows that the research team also has its sights set on the treatment one day being able to destroy whole tumours.

John was patient number three to receive a new experimental PDT treatment developed by Dr Steve Pereira and his team at University College Hospital in London.

PDT (Photodynamic Therapy) is developed and approved to treat Barrett's oesophagus, the most common skin cancer and cancers of the head, neck and mouth.

The trial for pancreatic cancer is running alongside similar trials for prostate cancer, bile duct cancer and early stage lung cancer. In all the others the results are described as 'significant' by hospital teams.

PDT destroys target tumours through a combination of light and drug that 'switches off' the supply of pure oxygen to the cells. Without oxygen, the cells die.

His treatment was seen around the world on the web and via Sky News. "It was remarkable. I was in theatre for a matter of a few minutes having the treatment. It was virtually painless,

and four days later I was back at home and able to resume normal life, almost able to forget that I had been treated,” he says.



John knows that luck has been on his side, being one of only 12 people able to receive the experimental treatment. Despite having only received a very low level of drug and light – due it being a trial – scans showed a slight reduction in tumour size.

“For patients coming after me, they have upped the levels and I gather that the tumours have shown a marked reduction in size. That’s why I am so desperate to be re-treated. For me, PDT is the only

hope. Nobody survives this cancer with chemotherapy alone,” he adds.

“I just want Dr Pereira and his team to really blast the cancer, and see what happens. But I gather they aren’t allowed to. It’s against the rules of the trial. They aren’t my rules. This is my life we are talking about.”

John says that he is now part way through his first six months of chemotherapy. “The effect it has on me is simply awful. Every week I have to have another infusion of the drug. It puts me to sleep for two days and I feel dreadful. For the next two days I start to feel slightly better, and by day five I can begin to function again. It means that I have a ‘window’ of two days every week when I can be with my wife, children and grandchildren and be anything like ‘normal’. The rest of the week I am wrecked.”

John’s family business, Lordship Furnishers in London’s Wood Green, is now suffering badly with him unable to focus or work. His son has been granted leave by his company in Spain to spend a week back in the UK to keep an eye on things.

While John remains grateful to have been allowed to take part in the PDT trial, the result he wants seems tantalizingly close.

“The chemo I am on is going to cost the NHS £50,000 over a year. Again, I am very grateful, but is it going to help to save my life? I know the statistics. With chemo 5% of patients are alive after two years.

“I am told that my PDT costs around a quarter, and I can believe them.

“On top of the NHS costs of my treatment, I have to pay new staff to run my business – probably £40,000 this year. One day a week, someone has to get me to hospital, and when I am home all family life is effectively destroyed.

“If I had PDT – even if the end result was going to be the same - I would have cost the NHS less, and I would have had my life back and not dread each new weekly treatment.

“The difference is that, one day, I believe PDT will be proved to be more effective than chemo and every patient will have it. I have never minded being the guinea pig, but would like to have a repeat or two of the PDT to see what really happens.”

Ends

Further information from David Longman, Director, KILLING Cancer

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