

Patient story: Barrett's Malcolm Oliver

KILLING  cancer

Malcolm finds PDT days before radical surgery

Malcolm Oliver was sitting in hospital in Tunbridge Wells when his mobile rang. "Don't have the op. I have some great news for you," came the voice from his cousin. Angela Frier, the former managing director of ITN International, had been doing her own research about the Barrett's Oesophagus that was blighting Malcolm's life. Barrett's is the forerunner to oesophageal cancer.

Says Malcolm (pictured left), a retired research project engineer with BT: "I was having all the final tests to see if I could cope with the op that would remove my oesophagus when the call came though. I was less than a week from surgery that would have changed my life beyond all recognition.



"Within 24-hours, Angela had sent faxes and emails to everyone involved in my treatment, saying that I wanted to be considered for something called PDT. She had even spoken to Dr Laurence Lovat, the man who I can honestly say has saved my life. Without him and his team, I don't know where I would be today."

Actually, Malcolm does have a fair idea about the possible outcomes. To start with, he would be minus his oesophagus, while he was also told that six out of every 100 patients don't even leave the hospital after the surgery, such is the extent of the surgery.

Instead, in July 2005 Malcolm spent four very comfortable days in the specialist National Medical Laser Centre unit at London's University College Hospital. With barely any pain or discomfort, he received the PDT treatment (Photodynamic Therapy) that has cured him of his pre-cancer.

PDT is a combined drug and light therapy that effectively eats away at the cancer cells by depriving them of oxygen. There is no surgery and no painful heat-generating process that burns the tissue. Equally, there are none of the traditional side

effects patients get with chemotherapy and radiotherapy, such as hair loss and white blood cell damage that can leave the body susceptible to infection.

With PDT, within a matter of two weeks the oesophagus has a new and cancer-free lining, and life can return to normal for patients.

If Malcolm had taken the surgical route, recovery would have taken up to nine months following the procedures to lift his stomach and repair muscle damage. He would also have had to re-learn how to eat as his stomach would have been moved into his chest cavity and been turned into a new swallowing tube.

Instead Malcolm is scar free and was leading a normal life again within a matter of days of his treatment.

"All the talk of cancer – including the suggestion that I might have liver cancer as well – was like a death sentence. I was preparing for the worst, shutting down everything in my life in case I couldn't function in the future. As a mad keen motoring enthusiast, I had even given many of my records and notes to others in case I didn't survive the treatment.

"As soon as I came home from the PDT, I got everything back, and I am now making plans to rebuild two classic Alvis cars that have been waiting for love and attention."

While Malcolm is relieved at his own personal outcome, he feels immense sadness that so many patients are not offered PDT, and information about its availability is so little discussed in the medical world.

"I am incredibly lucky, and I will never forget that fact. I can eat virtually anything I like, and over the last year I have been through all the usual checks and procedures that tell me that I have made a full recovery.

"I have Angela to thank and for all the people around me who must have spent hours on the internet to get the PDT answers and that this little-known treatment is available on the NHS at the National Medical Laser Centre in London.

"Finding that I had the condition in the first place was something that I discovered purely by chance, and now I have to do all that I can to help the people who come after me to make sure that they know about this wonderful treatment."