

# Patient story: Mouth cancer

## Victor Handley

KILLING  cancer

## Victor was dreading his 4th mouth cancer op

When you have had three surgical operations for mouth cancer – the longest being of more than 12 hours – you fear the worst when your specialist tells you that the problem has recurred. How long will the operation be for this time? How much tissue will be removed? Will I lose my ability to speak? Will eating be even more of a problem in the future?

The only difference for Victor Handley this time around was that his specialist wanted him to have PDT – Photodynamic Therapy.

PDT is a relatively unknown treatment being pioneered at the National Medical Laser Centre at London's UCL.

Victor's specialist at the Derby Royal Infirmary, Keith Jones, has despatched a few patients to London in the past to be cared for by Colin Hopper, a head, neck and skin specialist who has been among the pioneers of this therapy.

When Victor asked the question about tissue removal, the response took him by surprise. "None," said Mr Hopper. "None at all."

PDT works in a radically simple way. It uses a photosensitising drug that is applied topically to the cancer, or injected – depending on where it is. Anything from a couple of hours to a couple of days later, the drug will be fully absorbed into the cancer, and the second part of the treatment can begin.

A non-thermal laser is shone onto the cancer tumour or into it if it is below the surface. The light activates the drug that kills the cancer by effectively knocking out its oxygen supply.

Victor knows that PDT isn't a cancer cure – the Holy Grail that everyone else searches for – but it is a treatment that, for him, is quick, non-invasive and has helped to preserve his quality of life.

"PDT isn't suitable for every cancer yet, but that is due to the appalling lack of funding that has been made available for research at the National Medical Laser Centre. We can only hope that with more patients like me speaking out, we will be able to focus some attention on this very special treatment," he says.

It is for that reason that the Centre has now launched its own charity. Killing Cancer is working hard to promote PDT to the medical world and patients alike, while also seeking to raise millions to fund the next generation of PDT treatments.

PDT is now being used to treat patients with a wide range of cancers, in addition to the head, neck, mouth and skin work. The lung cancer successes are producing spectacular results when the tumour is caught quickly enough, while Barrett's Oesophagus is another of the medical victories for PDT. The most recent advances are coming in the treatment of prostate cancer.

The future of PDT is likely to be in the brain, pancreas, colon, bladder and maybe several other cancers. Arterial disease and bile duct cancer are two more key challenges where the charity is focusing its attention.

Victor Handley doesn't understand why the cost benefits of PDT haven't been grasped by the NHS. "It must be a lot cheaper for the medical world to treat patients like me with PDT. If everyone involved in my treatment had known about PDT years ago, I would be in much better shape. As it is, I am very optimistic about my future."

Within six weeks of Victor's PDT treatment he is now back at work again, working for egg.com. For his wife and grown up son, there is an element of relief in the family.

"For me, PDT offers me a future that I can look forward to with greater confidence. If something recurs, I know that I can have PDT again. I am so grateful to everyone involved in my treatment, especially my surgeon for referring me. I just want to spread the word that PDT should be regarded as a patient treatment option. It isn't suitable for every patient and every cancer, but for those where it is, PDT should be much more widely available."

