

REMARKABLE RECOVERIES

Surviving cancer against the odds. What are the chances? How is it done?

Public address given by Dr Ian Gawler OAM at the launching
of the book *Surviving Cancer* by Professor Chris O'Brien
May 2008

I would like to start by acknowledging those fellow survivors who shared their stories in this book *Surviving Cancer* edited by Paul Kraus.

It is a big thing for them personally to be speaking of something that is intensely personal and precious and to lay themselves open to public scrutiny. This is particularly so, as for many in the book, they are going against the norm of the day. Many of these people experienced their doctor saying that they would not survive. For some, friends, perhaps even family, thought and even said that they would not survive.

But they did survive. And like me, no doubt they will be very conscious of fellow travelers who did similar things, tried their very best and died anyway. So we survivors are very respectful and conscious of our good fortune. And it may interest you to know that as a subtle consequence of surviving, you often have to deal with the fact that "I survived, others did not". And in the subtle way of what it is to be human, survivors need to learn how to deal with the natural envy of families and friends of those who died. So we want to celebrate, yet are respectful and cautious; and of course, there is often the doubt - could it come back?

So to offer yourself as a model is a big thing to do. I want to acknowledge the courage of these people, the courage it took to face their own cancer and to overcome it; and then the courage it takes to share their stories.

Why such a book?

Dr Ainslie Meares said after I recovered, "It only has to be done once to show that it is possible". This book is a solid offering of hope. It contains 28 remarkable stories of 28 remarkable people, each telling of their remarkable recoveries.

There are a few like Bernice Grocke and Mike Sowerby who had no medical treatment. Most used a combined approach. Most have survived 10 years since facing a very difficult diagnosis and short prognosis. Some are 20 and 30 years on.

So what does science say about all this? Well remarkably little in fact. It seems an extraordinary oversight to me how little formal study has been made of long term, particularly unexpected cancer survivors.

In medicine, unexpected recoveries are often described as Spontaneous Remission or Spontaneous Regressions. The Gawler Foundation's Research Officer, Dr Sherelle Dye, has prepared an excellent review paper on this subject which is available on the Foundation's website.

Briefly, Spontaneous Regression is said to occur when a malignancy partially or completely disappears without medical treatment, or as a result of a therapy that is considered inadequate to exert a significant influence on neoplastic disease.

Most of the stories in *Surviving Cancer* fit this definition - particularly when many seem to have survived a very long time after a treatment that was not expected to be curative.

Now, remarkably, no one seems to be sure what the going rate for Spontaneous Remission is. The best figure seems to be about 1 in 60,000 to 1 in 100,000.

I like playing with figures. At the Foundation we have had about 15,000 people attend our 12 week Cancer, Healing and Wellbeing program and 10 day residential Life & Living Program. There are 28 people in this book and many others with similar stories that could have been told. But just for ease, say it was only 30. 30 into 15,000 goes 500. So one in 500 people coming to us could be said to have a Spontaneous Regression, compared to the average of 1 in 60,000. That means that we have over 100 times the going average. Now, even if we are a factor of 10 out - and it is only 10 times greater - to my mind that is still remarkable and warrants deeper investigation. But in fact, we could have told many more similar stories than "just" the 28 presented in *Surviving Cancer*. Let us push for research into this area. Why do people survive against the odds? Were they just lucky? Is what they did repeatable?

Certainly, if you ask the people in the book, they will tell you that there was nothing spontaneous about their survival. All these people worked hard at it.

Happily, there have been a few investigations of people who did survive against the odds.

In the early 1990's I surveyed 35 long term survivors who had been through the Foundation's programs. They were asked to rank how important they felt a wide range of things they may have done were to their survival.

The first thing to report is that most people claimed that a wide range of things were important. What this means is that they did a lot. Their recovery was not a casual business.

Also, I asked them to pick the three most important things that contributed to their survival. Many people actually wrote on their questionnaires that it was hard to separate out just three things as there were so many of importance. But given the question, they responded and three factors stood out:

1. Using diet as a therapy
2. Using the stillness of meditation
3. Their spiritual life

Then I asked, if you were speaking to someone newly diagnosed, what would you recommend. Four things received emphasis:

1. Using diet as a therapy
2. Stillness meditation
3. Attend a lifestyle based self help cancer program
4. Develop meaning and purpose in life, e.g., give attention to why you want to live

Around the same time in 1992, Professor Gabriel Kune, Emeritus Professor of Surgery from Melbourne University, who wrote the foreword to *Surviving Cancer*, edited the book, *The Psyche and Cancer*. His own contribution described what he called the special characteristics of long survivors with Advanced Malignancy. There were four he observed and I quote:

1. Seek a wide exposure to conventional medical opinion and treatment. They take “control” of their health. They will decide for themselves what advised treatment to have and what treatment not to have. They are often critical of their medical management.
2. Seek also a wide exposure to non-conventional opinion and treatment. Again, they will decide for themselves what they will choose to have and again they are often critical of non-conventional management.
3. Operate at an intuitive level. They are usually not “thinkers” or intellectuals. They tend not to operate at a rational level as their main guide for making decisions, and appear to make decisions intuitively.
4. Are at peace with themselves. One often gets a sense of tranquility, peace and spirituality while in their presence. They are not at all fearful.

More recently, review articles published in 2004 by Schiltz and the organisation called the Institute of Noetic Sciences suggested that the following characteristics are associated with regression and survival.

- A strong sense of self-sufficiency, competency and control
- Living a fulfilling and enjoyable life, beyond the crisis of cancer

- Having at least one strong, supportive and trusted relationship
- Being comfortable with the expression of both positive and negative emotions
- Finding meaning in the cancer experience and accepting the diagnosis but not the prognosis
- Working in partnership with health professionals and participating in decisions related to their health and well-being
- Regular participation in activities and practices that reduce stress.
- Having a sense of spiritual connection or awareness
- Flexibility and the willingness to try new things and/or make changes when something is no longer working So it's a pretty desirable list! Probably be of use to just about any situation. The question is - if you are faced with a life threatening condition, especially like cancer, how do you get it? Again, is it just luck, or can you acquire these traits? Are you just born with these qualities or can you learn them, train in them, and develop them?

Well here is the good news. Some of the people in *Surviving Cancer* will not mind me saying they started off with very negative mind sets. A lot of fear, anxiety, very little capacity to express themselves, especially when it came to emotions. Even grave doubts about their capacity to recover.

What they, and many people do have in common, however, is the capacity to recognise the need for help. To reach out, to seek advice, to learn, to persevere and to persevere again.

I feel that along with the 50 staff and many volunteers who work at the Foundation, I am in a privileged position. We get to work with these amazing people day after day. We often see people come to us distraught and in despair, looking for hope. And we get to help them transform suffering into happiness. We see it regularly. It is extraordinary to witness.

Yet it is not easy work - as you can imagine. So this book not only offers hope to others, but it validates and fortifies those of us who work in this arena.

Also, I would like to acknowledge Paul Kraus, who at 11 years and counting may well be Australia's longest mesothelioma survivor. Paul edited this wonderful book and has suitably honored each and every person's story.

And thank you to each of the contributors. This book will be like a beacon of hope to thousands of people; and more than just hope, it will be a beacon that helps to point the way to what is possible.