

FRIDAY THE 13th, one day in my life, Gemma Hoefkens tells of her battle with cancer.

I was a school registrar in London, aged 26, when diagnosed with cancer. That was 1996. Previously, in July 1992, I had had a condition called hydrocephalus, or water on the brain. I had an operation for this and had made a good recovery. However, as time went on I began to get some alarming symptoms. My short-term memory was really bad at times, making my job very difficult. My eyesight got worse, so that I would bump into things sometimes and I would sleep so deeply so that I could not be woken. Strangely, these symptoms would come and go and I had them checked by a doctor.



My G P in 1993 referred me to St Bartholomew's Hospital where I had a brain scan. I was told there was nothing wrong with me, it was my imagination. I was not convinced and my symptoms were getting worse. Later that year, I asked my G P for another referral and in June 1994 and I had another brain scan at King College Hospital. It revealed a growth in the middle of my brain. I was assured that this did not need any treatment because it was so small – the size of the little finger.

However in January 1996 I was told at King College that I had a few tumors but they were benign. They were too deep to operate on and I was advised to have a brain biopsy. I was then informed that I should have radiology treatment at St Bartholomew's. It was terrifying. I had to lay face down on a table and have a mask bolted down over my face, so that I would stay perfectly still whilst the treatment took place. At my first appointment, the treatment was about to begin when the radiologist burst through the door and shouted "stop". The treatment could not proceed. They had discovered more tumors down my spine.

I then had to be marked up on my back with a pen - to let the radiographers know where the tumors were so they could direct the radiology on my spine as well as on my head. I was often violently ill after the treatments and all my hair fell out in one weekend – well,

apart from a few strands. I looked like a baby chick. I thought, as long as I was going to get better, I would put up with it as it was a small price to pay.

Months later the results showed the radiology had removed the tumors from my spine but this was not enough. The radiologist advised me to have chemotherapy. My trust was in their hands and I believed their treatment would save me. "Doctor knows best". It was years later I realized that I had fitted perfectly with traditional British culture.

I returned to the hospital and along with the chemotherapy, I had huge doses of steroids, aimed at preventing any more inflammation or growth of the tumors. In four weeks I had put on four stones in weight, I did not recognize myself in the mirror. My eyesight was getting worse, I had double vision, could only see an arms length away and even that was all fuzzy. My eyelids did not open voluntarily. I had to hold one eyelid up to see anything. When I could walk, I needed a stick. As things got worse I was issued with a wheel chair.

Friday, 13th October 1996 The consultant told me the treatment was making me worse and there was nothing more he or the hospital could do for me. He asked if I would like to stay in hospital, go to a hospice, or go to my parents home. He wished me all the best and said "have a very good Christmas". I realized some months later that what he had said indicated his thinking was that it would be my last Christmas. In his report to my GP the consultant's registrar wrote "I have explained the scan findings to Gemma and her mother. I have explained that chemotherapy has not helped since her disease has progressed during her treatment. I have also stressed that there are no other viable options for treating the disease but that treatment will now be directed at the symptoms".

I decided to go home to be looked after by my parents. That was my lucky turning point. I was in a really bad state – apart from being bald and very overweight. The doctors were right I was on my death bed and needed to be treated as such. I felt so desperately depressed, it was so unfair, I didn't want to die. I would wake up in the middle of the night with agonizing pain down my legs. I could not even get to the toilet on my own. I was not able to lift my arms to reach for a drink of water. I was just lying in bed – waiting to die. In my own words, I felt like a vegetable.

At this time, my sister-in-law called me. Her youngest daughter was having homoeopathic treatment for her eczema following which it had completely cleared up. Did I want to see this homoeopath?

I was a genuine skeptic of alternative medicine and anyway, I had cancer, not just a rash. How could plants and flowers help me? But I did not have anywhere else to turn, so I decided to "give it a go".

The homoeopath, Janice Butcher, came to my parents' house, as I was unable to visit her. She was very pleasant and kind, asked me lots of questions and gave me some very small white pills. Within a day or two some more bottles arrived which she described as organ remedies and one of those was a blood remedy. Miraculously, shortly afterwards, my blood-count rose which enabled me to avoid an already planned blood transfusion organized by my doctor. Things began to improve and I continued to see the homoeopath on a regular basis. The decision I had made to go home to my parents was the correct one. It was the only option available as I was on welfare and my family paid the bills.

Gradually I weaned myself off the steroids, so my weight could begin to reduce. My energy improved and I found I was able to move around more easily. I began to feel like a human being again. After the blood test Janice had put me on a detailed program. Personal counseling, meditation, relaxation, anger management were all part of the therapy. A detoxification plan was arranged. I had remedies to detox the effects of the many medications and the effects of the radiation. Diet and nutritional rebuilding were part of the program. Exercise, moderate at first, new interests and positive thinking were part of the homoeopathic treatment. I received fatty acid liquescence to provide a brain food and a blood tonic. Later I came to know it as omega 3 and 6. I remember the words "you must not waste your energy on being angry" and other such expressions from Janice.

In early 1998, one year after I had been sent home to die, I returned to London and moved back into the shared house I used to live in before my illness. I would still be extremely tired but I was independent again and that felt great. I did not go back to work as I continued with my recovery. In June 1998 I telephoned St Bartholomew's Hospital to make an appointment. They remembered me and could not believe it – "You sound so well". They thought I would be "pushing up the daisies" by then.

At the appointment I saw the same consultant. He did a few tests and said that I had made a "remarkable recovery". He offered me a scan

but I did not want one. I knew what it felt like to have a tumor and I did not want to put myself through all the tests again. I told him about my homeopathic treatment and that I attributed the recovery to that. He walked across the room as if gathering his thoughts, then gave his opinion. He said my recovery was probably due to a delayed reaction to the chemotherapy.

On my way out, and of course walking without a stick now, I saw all the other cancer patients waiting to see the consultant. I wanted to stand on the coffee table and shout out to all of them – "You don't have to do this, there are other treatments". But my eighteen months of homeopathic training paid off "take it easy" so I controlled my anger and said nothing. It was just the very direct dismissal of my opinions that had raised my ire. Later when I read his letter to my GP I felt a bit better, it read "this young lady has made a remarkable recovery, a few ocular motor movements are her only abnormality. Gemma attributes her recovery to homeopathy and whether it is due to that or a delay in her 1996 chemotherapy remains a mystery. Nevertheless I am delighted to see her in such good health." He was less sure in his written word.

I continued to make progress. I went traveling to the Middle East, to fulfill some of my life dreams that I'd contemplated when I was so ill and thought I'd never get to do. I visited the Pyramids in Egypt, on to Israel and other countries. Snorkeling in the Red Sea is one of my best memories. I sent several cards from different places to my consultant- at St Bartholomew's - my way of letting him know I was alive. Janice laughed when I told her, but it was my way of working the anger out of my system. It was 1999 before I was able to think about work again as I was physically and emotionally stronger. And, you guessed it, I signed up for my four year homeopathic course. Ten years on I am practicing as a homeopath. This year the tenth anniversary, I contacted my consultant at St Bartholomew's to tell him of my experiences over the years. I asked if he still thought my continuing existence was due to a delayed reaction to chemotherapy. He said "I think this might be the case". He could not say if it was nor indeed could he tell me if other cancer patients had responded in a manner which he believed I had responded. Clearly he continues to believe only in his conventional methods and I wish him well.

Do not get me wrong, I know homeopathy or nutrition cannot cure everyone, in fact I am convinced it will not. However, I am equally convinced it will help many people. For those, a minority who have the information (who have the vision and the money), they can go for private treatment, it is readily available. But the majority of patients

with cancer and other chronic diseases suffer needlessly and many die at an early age. Having got a second chance at life, I feel duty bound, even passionate, to let others know that there are other choices. What I would love to see today is an integrated health service where complementary medicine and conventional medicine work hand-in-hand sharing their skills and giving better service and hopes to the many patients out there. One sad note, Janice Butcher passed away in 2006. She was a special person and had been in active practice for twenty years and contributed to the health of many people. Her work was key to my second chance.

Gemma Hoefkens works as a complementary health practitioner and can be contacted at 0121 311 2824 and on www.homoeopathysuttoncoldfield.co.uk