

My Experience with Blood Cancer

While walking on holiday in Portugal I had a simple fall and sustained two fractured ribs. The pain in my rib area was worsening over a period of months and normally fractured ribs heal after six weeks. Things were not quite improving as quickly as they should have been and my GP conducted a series of tests which included full blood picture, MRI and a CT scan. Test results were suggestive of Multiple Myeloma, a blood cancer which forms in a type of white blood cell called a plasma cell. Plasma cells help to fight infections and Multiple Myeloma causes cancer cells to accumulate in bone marrow, where they crowd out healthy cells.

Yes, a huge shock from fractured ribs to having a diagnosis of cancer. The start of my journey. My GP subsequently referred me to Professor Michael O Dwyer, chief haematologist in University Hospital Galway. His name sounded good as I have a son-in-law called Michael O Dwyer. And so it began.

My meeting with Professor O Dwyer will always be remembered. A bone marrow test confirmed my diagnosis. Normal treatment for Multiple Myeloma was explained to me. A combination of therapy of chemotherapy and steroids. However, it was also mentioned that I was suitable candidate for a trial drug called Daratumumab. Those words completely changed my heavy load. To quote my words to him 'I was very excited about this'.

I texted my daughters after my appointment and told them of the trial drug. When I reached them an hour later they had seen a seven minute video online of Professor O Dwyer giving information on my trial drug. Daratumumab significantly improved survival rate when added to the current combination therapy of chemotherapy and steroids for Multiple Myeloma. They hugely agreed and my decision was instantly made easy. Daratumumab was to improve my cancer outcome, my overall survival and a step forward for me where I could benefit from this latest advance in treatment for Multiple Myeloma. It also meant that both myself and other patients diagnosed after me, would be taken closer to finding treatments that stop people dying from cancer.

My experience of blood cancer is with the clinical trial team of Clinicians, Scientists, Pharmacists, Laboratory Technicians and, last but not least, my research nurse Jess, Clinical Research Facility, Galway University Hospital. My lifeline, handpicked for the job, with whom I developed a close and trusting

relationship. She always provides communication of all information pertaining to my trial drug, which was honest and clear. Jess worked closely with Dr Rob Henderson, registrar with Professor O Dwyer. She was always a text or a phone call away from me on any issues encountered with my treatment. Jess consulting with Dr Henderson had that ability to demystify any situation or appointment. I had a preliminary meeting, where all aspects of treatment were explained to me and a detailed consent was signed.

I was hospitalised for my first treatment to closely monitor any side effects of the drug. My experience was a cough and nasal congestion, which lasted a minute. I could continue my planned treatment. Usual side effects of chemotherapy like nausea, constipation and fatigue were present but all symptoms were treatable. Thereafter I received my treatment in the oncology day ward, Universtiy Hospital Galway, where I was with the most wonderful staff, in a hugely challenging job, and I quickly became part of a new family.

Being involved in a clinical trial drug there are a lot of extras, like more detailed and very frequent blood work, laboratory work, e.g. chromosomal studies, bone marrow tests and additional imaging such as pet scans. My response to treatment was excellent and after six months, my bone marrow testing and blood profile tests showed very good improvement.

My treatment is ongoing and I am in a very good place now. My journey has been very positive.