

Taking drastic steps for survival

'If you watched it on the telly, you'd think "Oh, for goodness sake, that's a bit far fetched",' said Christine Bisson, who turned 56 on Tuesday. But this is not fiction. Last year she became one of the estimated one in nine who will become diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime. And as Zoe Ash reports, Chris' story is particularly poignant because she was still grieving the tragic loss of her niece, a sufferer who had died only months previously.



CHRIS hadn't thought anything of it. She remembers exactly where she was when she received the reminder for a mammogram. 'I was away in England at the time. I remember because my husband, Andy, had to change the date. I was supporting my sister, looking after her daughter, Sam who had breast cancer.'

UK resident Sam had found a lump in Her breast four months after giving birth to her second son, Luke, but had put it down to mastitis. She decided to go for screening but had to wait her turn. 'They weren't as quick off the mark in the UK,' said Chris. 'I really feel, knowing what I know now, that she would have been fast-tracked here.' Things moved quickly when Sam was finally diagnosed and she underwent chemotherapy, a mastectomy and then radiotherapy. But her tumour was just too aggressive. Sam was 36 when she found the lump. She died just 14 months later, in December 2003.

A few weeks passed and Chris and her family decided to go on holiday in an attempt to start pulling the terrible events of the past year behind them. A short while before. She had gone for the routine mammogram. She returned to Guernsey on a Sunday from her holiday and the following Tuesday a letter arrived from the breast screening unit recalling her.

Chris thought little of it. She was far more bothered about missing work, having had so much time off in order to support Sam during her illness.

It was only when she called to reschedule the appointment that the seriousness of the situation began to hit home. "The lady said, "Ah. That's the only day the doctor is in". The alarm bells rang then. I thought [I was just going back for another mammogram but there was obviously more to it. And I didn't really like what I was hearing.

One of her biggest concerns was telling her sister, to whom she is very close. 'We've shared everything but I couldn't tell her until I knew. I thought, "hundreds of women get recalls",' she said. In fact, Chris and Andy, reluctant to worry their family unnecessarily initially told no one.

Chris showed me her diary page for the week of the mammogram. It was the neatest, most organised one I've ever seen

On Thursday 26 February, her mammogram appointment sits neatly above a line reading, Imperial M and J': dinner with her eldest son and his fiancée. Further down, on the Saturday, is a reminder to go and look at wedding dresses with her middle son, Jody's, fiancée. Mel

It looked utterly wrong, such an extraordinary, life changing

BREAST CANCER - THE RISK FACTOR

Women are the most likely to develop breast cancer - it affects one person in nine. Age is the single most important (factor influencing risk - 80% of all breast cancers occur in post-menopausal women.. Those with a genetic susceptibility account for between five and 10% of all cases. They tend to have a strong family history of breast or ovarian cancer and these usually occur at an early age in close family members such as a grandmother, mother, aunt or sister. Hormones also play an important role in the development of the disease and factors such as the age at which periods begin and stop.

having children and the age at which they have them will all affect the risk factor.

Risk up to age 25 - 1 in 15,000
Up to age 30 - 1 in 1,900
Up to age 40 - 1 in 200
Up to age 50 - 1 in 50
Up to age 60 - 1 in 23
Up to age 70 - 1 in 15
Up to age 80 - 1 in 11
Up to age 85 - 1 in 10
Lifetime risk (all ages) - 1 in 9

Source: Breast Cancer Campaign.

'My Initial reaction was "Oh God, I can't Believe this. It can't be happening".'

Chris Bisson

calcification turned out to be benign but the tissue around it was pre cancerous. This, she said, should have been missed, but had been picked up by chance.

'It was unreal but I really felt I was going to be fine. I had a feeling that this was all Sam's doing. Time and again she had said to me, "I'm never going to be able to thank you", and I just think that the chance finding of the pre cancerous tissue was her way of thanking me.' Andy was there to offer support when Chris received the news she found so difficult to absorb. You're numbed by it, you always think it's not going

care.'

Chris was presented with three options: radiotherapy, surgery or doing nothing. But the last was never an option for someone who had witnessed at first hand the pain and suffering her family had only just gone through. 'I felt so lucky to have options. I thought, "how can I turn around and walk away from this now?" Mr. Rice didn't advise traveling to the UK for radiotherapy in Chris' case as the cancerous cells weren't limited to one area and there was no guarantee it would be effective.

'In some ways it was a blessing. I'd been to Southampton with Sam I didn't want to put my family through all that,' Surgery was the last remaining option and in May 2004. Chris underwent a mastectomy. 'I can remember Andy's face when I went in for the main surgery, Thai's

some higher power at work. Even the date of her biopsy was a year to the day after Sam's mastectomy, Chris isn't a religious person but she is an optimist and she does think that Sam is still around her in spirit, looking out for her,

'I gained strength from what happened. I very much felt that I had this guidance coming from somewhere.' Chris hasn't had reconstructive surgery but it is still a possibility, though it would involve travelling to the UK. From her point of view it is another major operation, this time involving taking muscle from her back 'I wasn't interested in reconstruction. I'm still not. I can still have the operation, it's never a closed door, but because of my age, I didn't think it would matter to me. I've never been a clothes horse and I wasn't particularly well endowed before, but I can appreciate how the cosmetic issue could be a

to be you,' she said 'I was constantly reassured that it was pre cancerous and treatable, that this is what having mammograms is all about. I felt so lucky, having done the full-blown journey with Sam and seeing the other side of it. We're so blessed with the unit we have here. I had wonderful support and

the hard part. It's not about you, it's about everyone else it touches,' she said. She received a huge amount of support from Karen Leach, clinical nurse specialist at the breast screening unit. And it's when people are in recovery that the Pink Ladies support group makes contact.

There are so many coincidences regarding dates between Chris and her niece that it is hard not to let yourself believe there is

far bigger one for some. My boobs have served a purpose, they fed my kids.' she laughed.

But how does it feel, having only one breast? 'It will never feel normal,' Chris told me, 'I still stand in the shower and think, "I didn't even have cancer, why am I like this?" But everyone has those low points.' The wearing of a prosthesis is the first stage after surgery and a long-term alternative to

major reconstruction work. After her operation, Chris had a follow up appointment for a fitting with Karen at the breast screening unit. The first time she tried wearing one, she put it in her normal bra rather than one designed specifically for the job.

'It was a rude awakening,' she recalled. I undid my bra and it fell out onto the floor. That's when you know that life is never going to be the same again, when you pick your boob up off the floor.' It's this typically irreverent sense of humour that has helped her through. 'Do you want to see it?' said Chris. As I gingerly felt the rubbery but perfectly-formed prosthesis, she told me that stick-on varieties are the new rage.

When you've been through what Chris has over the past couple of years, nothing is weird.

'I feel I came in through the back door of this journey because of the way they found [the pre-cancer] I was so lucky.

'When you come out of something like that, you make promises to yourself. You don't bother so much about the little things, before, I took things for granted things like wearing a swimsuit or a strappy top. But I do think twice now. "Then I think, "does it really matter?" 'It's a very small price to pay.'

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