



Breaking Bad News

Hearing Bad News: Anticipated Death

Kate

After the first time I had cancer, I promised myself I'd never go through chemo again. I'd been so ill with it and spent a lot of time in hospital. Then, five years on and just before my routine mammogram, I found another lump. I was terrified. I had thought I would just accept a new diagnosis and not go through treatment, but, when it came to it, I agreed to the chemo.

After 5 months of treatment things got worse. I was told that the cancer had spread to my liver. But, I still continued what's called 'the fight' and even though I felt very ill and exhausted all the time – I just didn't want to die. I had yet another cycle of chemo - each time being admitted with infections and a very low white count.

Then, one day, at my clinic check-up, the consultant asked me what I understood to be happening with my condition. I was shocked; it seemed to mark a change in the relationship. I told her I wasn't sure I could take much more. She nodded and waited for me to add something. I was silent.

Then she said, 'I think we're running out of options, Kate.'

There was a really long pause before I said, 'Do you mean I won't recover from this?'

She nodded, 'I don't think we can treat this cancer. We can carry on with treatment for as long as you want, but you might want to think about how you want to spend the time you have left.'

I knew the words hospice and palliative care were going to come up. Part of me was resisting and part of me felt some relief.

'Do you want me to go away and let you think about it?' she said, 'Or do you want me to stay and talk you through some options?'

I was crying and said, 'Please stay.'

She took my hand and said, 'I'll help you through this. We won't abandon you, whatever you want to do.' I was still crying.

Then she said, 'What are your fears and your concerns?'

I had a long list. 'Pain, sickness, humiliation, leaving everyone I love.'

'Ok, let's work on those. You have to decide what you want to do but not on your own.'

We talked about the meaning of hospice care. She told me I could continue with active treatment if I wanted but emphasised that chemo didn't seem to be working. She arranged for me to come back the next day and suggested I might want someone with me.

Although it was the worst night of my life, I did feel cared for – she was compassionate