

While investigating what she thought were worsening symptoms of indigestion, Bupa member Michelle Lykokapis discovered she had stomach cancer. She talks about her long but life-affirming journey towards healing.

by JODI WILSON



MY STORY

Life was wonderfully normal in early 2011 for stay-at-home mum Michelle Lykokapis. “I felt my life was pretty complete. We had a busy family life consisting of my two teenage step-daughters and our two sons, the youngest of whom was about to head off to pre-school; an opportunity for some ‘me’ time,” says Michelle.

Months earlier she had started taking medication for indigestion. Within a few weeks it had become significantly worse and required prescription medication from her GP. She also sought advice from her natural health practitioner and tried a liver cleanse and chiropractic-applied kinesiology. While her symptoms had eased over Christmas, they flared up again at the end of January. “By this stage no amount of medication eased the discomfort and my eating was severely compromised,” she says.

In March 2011 she had a gastroscopy, an examination of the upper digestive system, that confirmed a large ulcer and a suspicious growth at the top of the stomach near the oesophagus. The surgeon took a biopsy (a tissue sample) and sent Michelle for a CT scan. Two days later she was attempting to comprehend a cancer diagnosis.

“I was at a place in my life where I wondered what my purpose was. I knew that my life had brought me to this point for a reason. I took the diagnosis not as a victim but as an opportunity for accelerated growth and it was a chance for me to release any fear, anger and resentment,” she says.

FINDING HER INNER STRENGTH

Dedicated to documenting her journey, Michelle started a journal on the very same day she was diagnosed. Pages and pages of reflections and affirmations tell her story – one of strength, surrender and determination. “I had to understand life differently and I knew I was capable of being a new ‘me’ no matter what the final outcome was going to be,” she says.

Immediately after the diagnosis she was referred to a specialist surgeon who performed further tests to determine the type and severity of the tumour. Three

months of chemotherapy was prescribed as an attempt to shrink the tumour but unfortunately this failed. As a result Michelle had surgery to remove her stomach.

Significant support from Bupa ensured Michelle could concentrate on healing instead of worrying about the financial side of her treatment. “I called Bupa to find out what my insurance covered and thankfully it covered a lot, including my ICU admittance after the operation. I was also partially covered for a hair wig – I lost my hair from chemotherapy – which

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really made a difference to my recovery as I wouldn’t have been able to afford one otherwise,” says Michelle.

“Six weeks after my operation I met with my oncologist who decided it would be best to have six weeks of chemotherapy and radiotherapy in the hope that any microscopic cancer cells left after surgery would be eliminated,” says Michelle.

VITAL SUPPORT NETWORK

She describes the following weeks as the hardest of her journey – adjusting to the surgery and coping with the side effects of treatment required all of her energy.

However, unwavering support from her family and friends made all the difference and Michelle will be forever grateful. “I watched in admiration at the incredible dedication and strength of my husband who took on the responsibility of the world without one complaint and I’ve witnessed the beautiful generosity of friends and strangers,” she says.

From a medical perspective Michelle is clear of cancer but the next few years will require regular blood tests and CT scans to ensure it doesn’t return. “The surgeon has told me that if the tumour does not reoccur in two years then I have ‘kicked it’, and the oncologist said three years would be ideal. I have every intention of seeing my 43rd birthday!” says Michelle.

PEACE OF MIND

“When something like this occurs to yourself or a family member you want to know that you can have fast access to the best possible team of doctors – without the financial burden,” says Michelle. “Bupa covered my pre-surgery chemotherapy, surgery, anaesthetist, ICU admission, hospital physiotherapy and nutritionist as well as a portion of my post-operative chemotherapy and weekly hospital admissions. To have received exactly the same treatment without Bupa’s assistance, my husband and I would have had to take out a large second loan on our mortgage.”

Regardless of the enormous physical and mental challenges, Michelle has remained optimistic while she comes to terms with her new kind of ‘normal’.

“I have had to face my own mortality, I’ve grieved about the organs I have lost and I’ve cried rivers over my children while they slept at night, determined to do everything possible so they grow up with a mother. I have come out of this experience more humble, more understanding, more aware of who I am, what I want to be and what I want to leave behind.”



HOW WE CAN HELP

We support our members through the tough times, especially if you need to go to hospital.

Our *Going to Hospital* guide aims to help you navigate the health system and take the pressure off so you can focus on your recovery. Get your copy at bupa.com.au/goingtohospital, from your local Bupa centre, or call us on **134 135**.



FIND OUT MORE

For more information about stomach cancer and the organisations that offer support to patients and their families, visit:

- johnloganfoundation.com.au
- nostomachforcancer.org
- facebook.com/supportgroupforpartialtotalgastrectomypatients