

Doing it his way

Stuart Cox tells us why he kept his breast cancer diagnosis quiet at first and why he feels like a fraud due to only having minimal side effects from chemotherapy.

Stuart Cox (64) lives in Sandton, Gauteng. He is married with a daughter.

Last year October, Stuart was showering when he felt a lesion next to his right nipple. "I thought it might be a sebaceous cyst as I have had a number of them in the past. I had no pain or discomfort at all," he explains.

The next morning Stuart went to his GP. After examination Stuart was sent for an ultrasound. "I was somewhat reluctant, but my doctor is a persistent fellow," he says. A mammogram and another ultrasound were done as well as an ultrasound-guided core biopsy. A marker was also inserted into the breast.

Processing the diagnosis

A week later Stuart was diagnosed with Stage 1 breast cancer, with two lesions present (one was hidden behind the other). He says the week of waiting for the result gave him and his family time to digest the likely outcome.

Though he admits he was perplexed. "Breast cancer isn't something you hear of in men. I was devastated as I'm entering retirement and I really thought I had my health issues under control and that my path to retirement would be a smooth, healthy one. I was fortunate to have caught this early and my outlook was positive to tackle whatever lay ahead of me."

"I wasn't even aware that men could get breast cancer as media and medical aids focus on prostate testing, checking for testicular cancer and regular scopes for stomach and colon cancers. People we know have also had lung cancers, but I had not come across any men with breast cancer."

Discharged in time for Rugby World Cup final

"A mastectomy (with lymph node removal) was advised without plastic surgery. My attitude was to have absolute confidence in the medical team. I was able to select the team, I chose an all-female team and was



led by their advice. My recovery was quick, and I had no pain or discomfort. I was discharged within 18 hours of operating, with a drain and strict instructions to not use my right arm for a while – just in time to watch the Rugby World Cup final – my surgeon was very understanding of this," Stuart jokes.

"Although the lymph nodes were negative, my cancer is extremely aggressive, so six months of chemotherapy was recommended to kill any cancer cells which may still be lingering around."

Fortunately, Stuart has had minimal side effects. "I received a list of possible reactions to expect with medication to manage them. However, I haven't needed any of it. The only reaction I get is light-headedness and dizziness when getting up, and fatigue. I do feel like a fraud as so many people have such severe reactions to their treatments."

Stuart's hair took a while to fall out; he discloses he had difficulty dealing with this as initially he was concealing his diagnosis from people. When people commented on his new hairstyle, he responded by saying he wanted a change.

Keeping his diagnosis private

When asked why he kept his diagnosis under wraps, Stuart responds, "Firstly, to me, medical conditions are private and not something you talk about or draw other people into. Secondly, in my case, I felt that I had let myself and my family down. I have been so focussed on my health and we were all now thrust into a journey which was going to be foremost in our lives for

some time to come. Thirdly, the word cancer carries such negative connotations with many having experienced it with family and friends, and I didn't want to bring negativity into conversations. When you're diagnosed with a medical condition, you deal with it, treat it and life must move on. I also wanted to deal with it by myself without advice and other experiences. Everyone's condition and treatment are unique and if I listen to too many, my condition would totally absorb me which I didn't want to allow it to do," Stuart explains.

Ongoing support

"My family and friends have been magnificent, so supportive and understanding of what is needed; protecting me as much as possible from the noise this has created. They have tried to take all the pressure off me to allow me to focus on beating the cancer. Now that my diagnosis is out in the open, they are keeping family and friends informed of my progress which allows me to focus on myself and the journey."

More open to talk about it

Even though male breast cancer is rare, Stuart says the more he talks about it, the more he learns of men who have been diagnosed with it. He adds that he has no embarrassment and is happy to discuss it, saying, "You'll be amazed at how many men actually want to know more about it."

Stuart is looking forward to retirement and hopes to get stuck in his long list of hobbies. He also thanks his medical team for their professionalism and sensitivity in which they have dealt with him.