



Cancer mum tells of fight for life

Diagnosis shock for 28-year-old

Suellen Hinde

FIVE weeks after giving birth to her second child, Stacey Charbachi discovered she faced the fight of her life.

The beautiful young woman had been diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer.

Within 24 hours of hearing the news, Stacey turned yellow from shock.

"The doctor said that sometimes happens when you are traumatised," she said. "I couldn't believe it. I never thought cancer.

"I was 28 years old and I had no family history of the disease and before having Sam I was the fittest and healthiest I had ever been."

Breast cancer is one of the most common cancers among women in Australia, with more than 13,000 cases diagnosed each year.

Of these, only about 6 per cent involve women under 40.

Stacey was one of the youngest Queenslanders to be diagnosed with breast cancer, after she found a lump in her right breast towards the end of her pregnancy.

"It was a pretty sizeable lump," she said. "I just thought I am going to have this baby any moment and didn't think anything else of it.

"If it was anything, I thought it was clogged milk ducts and presumed once I had the baby it would be OK.

"But five weeks after having Sam it was still there."

Stacey went to her doctor, who scheduled an ultrasound a week later.

"That day I had an ultrasound and then a mammogram and then a needle

biopsy all in one," she said.

"I was thinking maybe they are making a big deal of this, surely it is not cancer. But the doctor at Queensland X-ray then put his hand on my knee and said 'we found a bit of calcification which is usually related to a tumour rather than a cyst'.

"At that point I couldn't talk and ran to the carpark to find my husband, Roby. The next day we both went to my GP with the scans - we both didn't want to believe it. The GP put it up to the light and said 'oh no' and I just started crying ... my husband and I lost it."

An emergency phone call to the Mater Hospital led to a 6pm appointment with one of the state's best breast cancer surgeons, Chris Pyke.

"They brought out the big guns for me because I was so young," Stacey said.

"I couldn't sleep worrying about my husband and my children.

"I had to survive for them."

Stacey went into surgery a week later for a lumpectomy but the surgeons couldn't get all of the tumour and that evening they removed her right breast.

She then faced 12 months of intensive treatment starting with chemotherapy, then Herceptin and radiotherapy.

"Lidiah, my daughter, was a little older but I was really worried about Sam," she said. "I couldn't breastfeed and I was worried there would be no bond between us.

"I felt distant from them and was so worried I would leave them behind."

Stacey's long dark hair fell out after her first chemotherapy treatment.

"It was hard to face that but I got a lot of new make-up and tried the best to make myself feel good," she said.

"Lidiah definitely understood mummy was sick. She would rub my head and would say, 'you are so beautiful mummy' and she would pray, 'please Jesus let mummy get better'."

Dr Pyke said young women diagnosed with breast cancer were often faced with the choice of "quantity of life" versus "quality of life".

"For a doctor involved in the care of a young woman with breast cancer, issues such as the future, having children, body image, sexuality, as well as how to tell family and friends, are all pressing and difficult to cope with," he said.

"Most women make the job of their doctors easy by complying bravely with proven treatment methods. Most also try to boost their health by non-proven means as well, and, embraced by hope, press on regardless so they will not have to face the reality of a premature death.

"Stacey's story reflects all of this."

Stacey is now cancer free but will not be given the all-clear until the five-year mark from her first diagnosis.

Throughout her illness she used writing as a release and has published a book, *Climbing Mountains*, to be released on Thursday to coincide with National Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

For information, go to climbingmountains.com.au. To support women with breast cancer, go to Cancer Council Queensland's girlsnightin.com.au.



FAMILY ORDEAL: Breast cancer survivor Stacey Charbach with children Lidiah, 5, and Sam 2.

Picture: Jono Searle

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