

My experience with cancer has certainly been a journey, and it is always going to be a journey because part of it remains with me.

I was 50 when I discovered what I considered to be an ulcer on my gum that didn't seem to heal, so I went to the dentist. The dentist referred me to a specialist in the hospital who took a biopsy of my gum, which showed that I had oral cancer.



When I got the diagnosis, it just hit me for a six, but I realised that I had to try to accept it and get on with life. I also had my four children who needed me, so I had to keep going.

## **Every day, five people in Australia are diagnosed with oral cancer**

I was referred to the ear, nose and throat surgeon at the hospital. Fortunately, I was seen pretty quickly, but I was nervous about what was going to happen. The surgeon told me that when they operated, they would need to attack the cancer aggressively.

It was a big operation and it had implications for me, as it had risks and would affect my appearance. Knowing that it was cancer and it was looking pretty bad, I said,

**'Look, just take it out. Do what you have to do, and I don't care what I'm going to look like.'**

They were proposing to operate to try to remove the cancer and part of the jaw. The worst thing for me was that I needed to have a tracheotomy. I found that very distressing indeed. They also needed to remove a bone from my leg, and the surrounding tissue, and then use it to reconstruct my jaw.

The whole operation took 10 hours and involved three sets of surgeons. I was in hospital for three weeks. An unusual thing though, for quite a while, was that I had hair growing inside my mouth from the tissue and skin from my leg!

I am still numb on the one side from just above the breast up to the shoulder. But I am one of the fortunate ones! You can't necessarily see too much that I have only got half a neck. I can eat OK and I can taste. For some people, the operation is not so successful, and even when it is, they can be left not being able to taste their food.

I have had times along my journey when I have been extremely anxious, particularly in the early days leading up to the surgery. I still get anxious even now, especially when I am going to see the specialist again and I start to worry what he is going to say. When I go to the hospital, it inevitably brings back all those memories of my time in there, which were not so good.



## **Without early diagnosis, the five-year survival rate for oral cancer is just 20–30%**

I have to say that my husband and my family were amazing. I don't think I could have gotten through it without their help and support all the way. And the specialists who played a major role in my reconstructive surgery were great, particularly as they both had so much to do in my case.

At the moment the cancer is at bay, but there is always the threat that it will come back. I have to keep going and keep hoping. I think that it is really important that there is enough money to ensure that people get the best treatment and support possible, to help people who have been in the same situation as me.

I know that eviDent Foundation is doing some amazing work aimed at oral cancers like mine. I hope that their research into early detection will mean that people won't have to go through the same things that I did.

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vital research into oral health**

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