

A Black Country Lad

Bob's story

*“Having a sense of humour has helped.
If you can laugh at these things you can get on.”*



I want to do this because if I can help someone else I will.

I was born in 1932, working class, I was in the forces and I met Sylvia my wife. We lived in Handsworth then we came here.

I used to be a governor at a large secondary school on the disciplinary committee, I was there for fourteen years and I loved it. I used to take Sylvia to work at the council and then used to go round to the school. I used to go away with them to outward bounds in South Wales. I used to be in the RAF. I was three years in paid service and five years in reserves. I did my training in England and then I was based in Germany for two and a half years. In those days it was called BAFO. That was 1951. They taught me to ski. Can you imagine me, a lad from the Black Country, skiing and playing tennis? Ooh it was great. I was stationed at Stafford when I came home.

After my diagnosis (for prostate cancer) I don't remember coming out of the hospital. My wife wasn't with me. My sister was with me.

I had been talking to my daughter on the phone and I had a terrible pain. I showed my doctor straight away and he collected some blood. During the tests they found a tumour on my kidney.

“The news is this” the consultant said “you've got a tumour on your right kidney, now I know you refused an operation on your neck but you can't refuse this. It's enormous, 27 centimetres. Also your tests for prostate cancer proved positive”.

I remember it was the day before my son's birthday that I had the surgery. I was in high dependency for two days. The tumour was as big as your head. I'd had no symptoms and my bowels were fine.

“How long have I had this growing?” I asked. “You've had it growing for about four years and your prostate cancer for about ten years” the consultant said. The consultant went on to say that my lungs, liver and bones were fine.

When they opened me up for my kidney the tumour was the size of a football. They thought it was attached to the bowels, but they clamped them off. They were clear.

There are positives: I'm on tablets and now my blood pressure has dropped. Now I just take something for my cholesterol levels (which most older people have to) and an aspirin, that's all.

They looked after me at the hospital. I was eating two meals a day. They were fantastic.

My concern all along has been Sylvia, my wife. I'm her carer. I'd leave notes on the door saying 'have you got your keys?' She's got heart problems, and asthma very bad. So she's in and out of hospital.

We are silly as people, we depend on a car. When you've got a problem with the car you realise how much you depend on it. This area is hilly and getting the bus is difficult.

Two of our children live abroad. Without Bridges we'd have been in trouble. They've been fantastic.

When I went into hospital we'd got another little grandson on the way. I worried I wouldn't be around to see him.

To me it's been an experience, but if you're going to have it, enjoy it. Surgery started on April 17th 2007.

Before I went into this particular hospital the stories I had heard about it in the press and from other people, weren't great. I remember the nurse at my pre-med asking if I had any concerns. "Yes, MRSA" I said. They took swabs and they came out OK. The nurse asked me if I was using the disinfecting hand stuff and I said that I was and that I was even using it on my groin. "Don't do that you'll burn yourself!" she said. "Yes but it will get rid of the MRSA!" I replied laughing.

I feel I've been remarkably lucky. I enjoy everything. I was in the RAF. I enjoyed it. People say I'm a fighter.

When on my own doubts would come into my mind. At the cancer group talking helped. It was a kind of therapy. At the Cancer Support Group there are men at all different stages.

Even the consultants owned up and said they hadn't had cancer so they didn't know what I would be going through. When you know what you're fighting you know what you're fighting. You have to be positive. Sometimes I'd be positive to protect Sylvia. This is where support from Bridges and the Cancer Support Group is really invaluable. There are people there who've had different types of cancer and I've got an information booklet so I can understand what's going on. The information really helps.

After the operation the nurse said "you can go out tomorrow". She was taking the catheter out. She had to scan it. They scan your bladder. She said I'd got retention. She said I'd have to go out with a bag on my leg.

My three kids have done well. I wanted to be around for them. My dad died of lung cancer so it's one of the things I'm terrified of, but my dad was a smoker. He went down to six or seven stone. I thought I couldn't face that.

I've warned my two lads. My sons can say "my dad had prostate cancer". My dad also had water works trouble. He had a catheter fitted. It was crude in those days. He said he'd never have it done again, but they had to do it again. To the best of my knowledge he had prostate problems. My father was 65 when he died of lung cancer. When I had to go to hospital for radiotherapy alarm bells began to ring. I explained my fears of it, because they tattoo you, you know. In fact I followed everything they told me to: diet and drinking plenty of water. My side effects have been negligible. I was able to go on holiday a few days after treatment.

Before my surgery I was on Valium, I was in a bad way after receiving the news. I came off them. They told me to do it gradually but I just chucked them down the toilet. If I make my mind up that's it. Emotionally that was a difficult time. When I was on my own I didn't want to be in the dark. I was going into Sylvia at night to be comforted just like a child. If it came on telly - anything about suffering from cancer - I'd feel sorry for myself, but then if it was about kids I'd feel guilty then. But at the time I didn't know what the outcome would be.

Two days before I went into hospital I decorated the bedroom. I left my pin numbers for my wife and even chose hymns. Just in case. Me and Sylvia talked it out. Sylvia reassured me. We couldn't sleep well, that's why I was on Valium. We needed each other. It was traumatic for both of us. Sylvia had had a heart scare and with the kids being so far away... they were brilliant they'd ring every night.

I also remember that one of my testicles was as big as a pear. I didn't tell anyone not even Sylvia. I was worried it might be cancer. At the Cancer Support Group I talked to a man who described a similar thing and he told me it was infection. It was the same as me. I was relieved. It wasn't a consultant it was someone who had gone through it. At the time I was on a drug, which is a chemical castration.

Having a sense of humour has helped. If you can laugh at these things you can get on.

There is a neighbour who's had something similar to me but he is very ill. If I see his wife I don't always tell the whole truth about how well I'm feeling. I don't like saying I'm fine.

I had an operation on my throat thirty years ago. A couple of years ago they wanted to do another surgery. The consultant thought I was thirty-seven and I was seventy-three. That didn't fill me with confidence. Now they are undecided as to what to do with this one.

Years ago I'd got multiple nodules on my thyroid. I found the lump when I was shaving two years ago. The left lobe was removed thirty years ago. My sister and father had the same thing and it was a man named Campbell Cook who removed them for us all.

I went in two years ago as an outpatient. It was a camera they put up your nose. The consultant told me to lie on the couch. He put a swab on my shoulder. "We are now going to do a biopsy"

he said. He put the needle into my neck, into my thyroid. It was painful.

“What we’re contemplating is giving you medication for this at the hospital as they’ve got a nuclear department but we haven’t decided yet” the consultant that I am seeing now says. That’s why they want this scan. They say they may not do anything. I’m waiting for this appointment in February.

Now religion is a touchy subject. We are Methodists. To me we should respect each other’s religions – it’s just an interpretation of the same God. Having this illness has made me respect that more. At the time we did pray. We still do. Prayer is a very big factor in it. Before I went into surgery I was on the trolley and I thought, this is the last little trip, boy, for you on wheels. I wasn’t scared because I’d made my peace. When I woke up in intensive care I thought, is this Hell? If it is I hope they’ve got some water because I’m parched.

When I went into hospital I had my own room and toilet. I was worried that that might have been so other patients didn’t see me die. “Can I make a request? Can I go out onto the ward and chat with the other patients” I said.

I went and sat with a lad. I thought I knew him. I realised I’d played football with him. It was over fifty years ago and we remembered each other. Even his scar, which he’d got from one of our players.

Since I’ve been ill we go to Ibiza. They have a lot of transsexuals there. I might fit in now. They warned me about this because your pectorals get swollen and tender. I’m only joking.

I said to the clinical nurse specialist “I’ve stopped the pills after seven months, is my hair thicker?” She said it might be but that I might have less body hair. Another side effect might be static electricity, I don’t know, but I went to the fridge the other day and I got an electric shock. I’ve not heard of anyone else having it. I’m seventy-five now. I’ve always loved my food but now I’m eating cooked tomatoes, sweet potato, root vegetables and red peppers. I’m now so conscious of my diet. I have tomatoes and pumpkin seeds. I chew those – they’re good for the prostate.

The surgeons have done their part.

The radiotherapists have done their part.

I’m doing mine. I’ll do anything. I don’t want it to come back again.

We like to go to Spain for holidays. I spoke to a bloke and we talked about insurance. It’s not always easy – insurance, if you’re ill abroad. I’ve said to Sylvia, if anything happens to me abroad well you can leave me up the corner in the hotel room. That would be nice for the next guests!

This week there has been a sparrowhawk out there in the garden near the bird table. There was a big flurry and he was eating another bird. I didn’t stop him because he’d go and kill another if I did that. But that’s life isn’t it?