

Chemo Brain Is Not All Bad

A monograph of personal experiences

There is a well-documented mental side-effect of cancer chemotherapy called 'Chemo Brain'. This documentation describes the symptoms as negative and moderately deleterious. My own experience, as I move to complete my third cycle of chemo, is that it is not all bad. I have described it to some of my clinical colleagues as 'after a couple of glasses of a good Rioja before you lose all sense of reality and morph into someone else'.

It is the stage when you feel great, positive, warm and very emotionally-fired and knife-edge, focussed and super-aware - **and** a little prickly if someone says something 'wrong'. Tears of emotion or of self-pity? Both. At different times.

Both triggered by things that would usually go unheard, ignored. Nothing is missed. I am super-aware of colours, sounds, tastes and smells. I see and hear things previously invisible and inaudible.

Is this how some gifted autistic people feel when at their creative best? If so I wish I could visit this plain more often. I talk more about my feelings (my feminine side? – so often suppressed in normal function?)

How do I let my mood take me? - because I know I am under the influence of my Chemo Brain - and it is by no means all bad? By no means bad at all.

However, when you look at the massive literature base on Chemo Brain, it is **ALL** negative and problematic. Very serious, analytical and awfully scientific, grown-up and adult. As you can imagine I have read it **all** extensively - mainly US-based but quite a lot on NHS Choices originating here in the UK referring to: 'Long- term side-effects on cognitive behaviour, memory

impairment and effects, effects on one's ability to multi-task.

Woe is me. Big trials. The future is bleak. I am a victim of all of this..... Help me'



I do not see it that way. My experience is that I have felt feelings that have changed the way I see the world, others, myself. And, yes, sometimes I lose the plot a bit and on occasions struggle for the word I am seeking – but that was happening before the first drip of cisplatin and 5-fluorouracil coursed my veins!!!!

But firstly, I am not convinced that these well-documented negative properties are an effect of the chemotherapy alone. Surely the stress, the poor sleep quality and the sudden change in life outcomes and approach must have an effect at least as potent as the chemistry?

And secondly, I know from my own experience after four pretty gruelling chemotherapy (and radical radiotherapy) cycles over as many months – these wonderful positive trappings pass in time. Sadly, they pass and gently lose their lustre, returning me to my 'normal' lesser self.

I have had great feelings of awareness, energy, emotions I have not felt before. All good. And then

there are the glimpses of struggling to find a word, losing my thought processes telling me the documented negatives are sitting there like a parrot on my shoulder reminding me of their potency. And to be cited, a minority of horrid flashes where I have been spiteful to those dear to me (the self-pity moments) or said something stupid to them in anger.

But I have also found it much easier to say 'I am truly sorry, I love you and appreciate you'. Quickly and with sincerity.

A feeling elicited by the overwhelming appetite that no moment should be wasted. No truth lost. An urgency to do the right thing. Now.

To date I feel this much more qualitative side of my Chemo Brain has not been given much air-play.

As my Chemo Brain starts kicking into action, it muses on from where, why and how these incredible feelings transpire, where do they originate?

Are they related to the chemotherapy at all? Or more emanating from the euphoria I experience that every drip of domestos through those cannula signifies millions of tumour cells being obliterated thus prolonging, and potentially saving , my life.

The brain placebo effect? If so - such feelings are undoubtedly real, palpable by others around me

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Christopher is a patient recovering from oesophageal cancer diagnosed in the summer of 2015. The 7th most common cancer causing death in men. He is also a Medical Biochemist having earned a First Class Honours Degree in Medical Biochemistry from the University of Surrey. He went onto a long career at Director and Board level in the pharmaceuticals, medical devices and medical publishing industries over three continents, and ran a large private hospital before establishing a number of his own global Healthcare Companies. Between 2013 and 2015 he worked with NHS England and the Royal College of Pathologists on a number of standardisation and leadership initiatives, including as Chair of the Steering Group for a Leadership Programme tailored for Radiologists and Pathologists. Between 2011 and 2015 he was a Non-Executive Director and Vice-Chair of Suffolk Mind, a mental health charity and is currently a Non-Executive Director of a Mental Health Hospital in North Norfolk and Vice-Chair of the Institute of Directors, Suffolk. He has a Master's of Business Administration (MBA) from Warwick Business School and earned a Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) by thesis in 2010. He is a Fellow of the Institute of Directors (FloD) and a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing(FCIM). He is the author of a number of articles and a regular feature on BBC interviews in Suffolk on mental health. He splits his work and play time between Suffolk in the UK and their small-holding in Bohemia, Czech Republic, is married to his Czech wife Martina, a Psychotherapist, and has two sons and a daughter.

and an unequivocal positive effect on my well-being.

Or is there a more rational, biochemical explanation? Or a multitude?

Are the biochemical pathways with which the chemo interfere, through stimulation or antagonism, shared by other mechanisms which would account for such symptoms?

Could the effects be synergising or opposing other known mechanisms related to mental or hormonal health? Or could they be a result of more fundamental happenings at a deeper, more cellular level – even nuclear or chromosomal?

These questions intrigue and taunt me - as answers to them are not readily accessible – at least to me.

Someone out there has parts of the jigsaw I cannot access, so shall we try to speculate together on what this is all about. Even if we do not definitively answer these questions, it may be fun trying..... I have therefore been urged by my colleagues to publish this monograph of my experiences - so if you have any first-hand or learned experiences yourself please let me have them.

Maybe my Chemo Brain is talking at this moment (!) but I do not want to lose it before capturing it.....