Not Happening on My Watch

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I'm Karen Dunn, and I live on the Wirral in Merseyside. My journey with ALK-positive lung cancer began in March 2023, and life has been quite a rollercoaster ever since. Looking back, there have been some incredibly difficult times, but also moments of hope, achievements I never imagined I would make, and a renewed appreciation for the people and things that matter most to me.

March 2023 – The Diagnosis That Changed Everything

Like many people, I initially thought I was suffering from a persistent cough and cold that I just couldn't shake off after COVID. Then I began experiencing pain in my lower back and neck, which I put down to lifting too many weights at the gym.

After three visits to my GP and several different courses of antibiotics, the pain continued to worsen. Eventually, a nurse arranged a blood test, which showed an abnormality involving my liver. I was advised to attend the Emergency Assessment Unit at Arrowe Park Hospital on the Wirral.

That was the moment my life changed.

I went in thinking I might have pneumonia and came away facing the news that I had lung and bone cancer. My husband, Mark, and I were in complete shock.

I was admitted to Arrowe Park and told I had to lie flat on my back because a tumour in my neck was dangerously close to my spinal cord. I underwent palliative radiotherapy to C4 and L5/S1 and found myself lying flat, wearing a neck collar, on the respiratory ward.

It was a surreal experience. I was trying to make sense of conversations with doctors, physiotherapists and Macmillan nurses, all while attempting to eat lying almost upside down! I spent ten days in hospital and they carried out a biopsy of my liver.

Eventually, I was sent home with a hospital bed and faced a two-week wait for the biopsy results to find out whether there was anything they could do for me.

Those were, without doubt, the worst two weeks of our lives. The waiting was unbearable.

April 2023 – Finally, Some Good News

Then came the phone call from my Macmillan nurse. She told me, "It's good news – you're ALK-positive!"

Those words changed everything. We were referred to Clatterbridge in Liverpool, where we met Dr Carles Escriu Justo and his team. I was prescribed Brigatinib, which I came to think of as “my tank”, and within just two weeks I began to feel better.

Slowly, I started rebuilding my strength. One of our first little adventures was walking along the New Brighton promenade with Mark and our bloodhound, Sansa. Those walks might seem like a small thing, but being able to get out and enjoy the fresh air again felt like a huge achievement.

By July, my neck collar had come off, and I began learning how to move properly again. With recommendations from Maggie’s, I started joining online movement and mobility classes to help rebuild my confidence and strength.

I was determined to get as much of my life back as possible.

Finding My Feet Again



September 2023 brought two milestones I was particularly proud of. I completed a sponsored walk for Cancer Research and learned to play the drums through Maggie’s. Both gave me something positive to focus on and reminded me that life could still hold new experiences and challenges worth taking on.

In April 2024, I discovered the ALK-positive Facebook group and began joining its monthly coffee mornings. Little did I know how important this community would become to me.

By May 2024, I needed something to aim for, so I set myself a milestone: if I could fly again, I wanted to visit my sister Treena in Switzerland. She had flown over to be at my bedside when I was first diagnosed, and I wanted to make that journey to see her.

Thankfully, we made it happen. We travelled to Switzerland in May and even managed to attend a family wedding in France that August. These were precious moments that reminded me how much there was still to enjoy.

However, September brought another setback when I developed shingles affecting my face and head. It knocked me back considerably, and I continue to take pregabalin for the postherpetic neuralgia it left behind.

By this stage, I was becoming familiar with the routine that comes with cancer: scans, blood tests, appointments and waiting for results. You might think you would get used

to it, but you don’t. Every scan brings its own anxiety, and waiting never really gets any easier.

2025 – Another Rollercoaster

In February 2025, Mark and I managed a well-earned break in Cape Verde. I was beginning to feel like Karen again, and the holiday gave me some much-needed time to relax and recharge.

I had been having denosumab bone injections and a side effect can be osteonecrosis of the jaw.

This started with swelling of the gums which caused movement of my teeth. The upper back tooth became loose and a root broke. This was followed by an extraction which left a piece of root in my jaw. The socket did not heal and I had to receive treatment from the maxillofacial unit at Arrowe Park Hospital to remove the root snd try to close the socket. Unfortunately, the jaw will not heal because the cells have died, so I am left with a gap - it can't been seen.

Then, in June, we received another shock. My cancer had progressed in my liver, and I was prescribed Lorlatinib, which I nicknamed “Lorna”.

Unfortunately, it did not agree with me at all. To say it wiped me out would be an understatement. I seemed to tick every box on the list of possible side effects, and it became a real struggle.

By October, the liver tumour had continued to grow and had reached 6 cm. I asked whether radiotherapy might be an option, but initially the answer was no because of the tumour’s proximity to my kidney.

After further discussions and a consultation with Dr Taz, I was able to have three weeks of radiotherapy in November.

Since then, it has been a waiting game to see whether the treatment would work. Thankfully, my September scan showed that the tumour had continued to shrink. That was a huge relief after what had been a frightening and uncertain period.

Mentally, this year has been particularly challenging. I kept asking myself what would happen next if the radiotherapy didn’t work. Living with that uncertainty can be exhausting, even when you try your best to remain positive.

The Importance of Community

One of the real positives to come out of this journey has been discovering the ALK-positive community. I was fortunate enough to attend this year’s conference, and behind the scenes I have also been helping with the bookings.

The ALK-positive Facebook group has been a lifeline. When you receive a cancer diagnosis, there is so much to deal with, but one thing people don't always talk about is the loneliness. It can be difficult to explain what you are going through to people who haven't experienced it themselves.



Finding others who understand, share information and offer support has made a tremendous difference. Meeting Jane Woods and taking part in the wellbeing course also helped me enormously.

I am now the regional ambassador for Merseyside, and the two lunches we have organised have been a great success. They have given people the opportunity to meet, talk and share experiences, while also giving Mark the chance to connect with other partners and share his own experiences of supporting someone with cancer.

I am incredibly grateful to Mr G for giving me the opportunity to return to doing some work by helping with the conference bookings. Before my diagnosis, I was a retired Police Inspector, but I had continued working part-time in training and assessing for the College of Policing.

Getting involved with the bookings has helped rebuild my confidence, particularly with computers, and given me a sense of purpose. It has been wonderful to feel that I can still contribute and use my skills in a meaningful way.

Family, Strength and the Things That Matter



If there is one thing this experience has taught me, it is to focus on what really matters in life.

I have an amazing husband, Mark, who has been by my side every step of the way. He meticulously records everything discussed at appointments, keeps track of my medication and makes sure nothing is overlooked. I honestly don't know what I would do without him.

We have a wonderful son, Craig, and daughter-in-law, Danielle, and our granddaughter, Maeve, who is now four. Maeve has given me an enormous reason to keep going and fighting. She brings so much joy into our lives, and spending time with her reminds me why I want to make the most of every opportunity.

I have always considered myself a fighter. I was born prematurely, weighing just two and a half pounds, and was given the last rites. Perhaps that fighting spirit has always been part of me!

My sisters, Bev and Treena, are a huge support, and I am lucky to have some wonderful friends around me, too.

I also have so much gratitude for the NHS staff who have looked after me. Sheila, my Macmillan nurse, and Emma, my Clatterbridge nurse, have both gone above and beyond in the care and support they have given me. Their kindness and dedication have made a real difference throughout this journey.

Having recently attended the conference with my sister Treena, I feel optimistic about the future. There are still challenges ahead, but I have learned that hope can exist alongside uncertainty, and that having people around you who genuinely understand makes an enormous difference.

Making Memories

One of our greatest pleasures is getting away in our VW campervan whenever we can, with Mark and Sansa, our much-loved bloodhound. There is something special about being able to escape for a few days, enjoy a change of scenery and spend time together without the usual routines.



This weekend, we are heading to the Llŷn Peninsula, and I am looking forward to another little adventure.

These days, what I want most is to spend what I call “deep time” with my family and friends. I want to be present, make memories and appreciate the moments we have together.

Of course, it makes me sad to think about how much time cancer might take away from me. There is still so much I want to do and so many memories I want to make. But I am determined not to let the disease define every part of my life.

I cannot control everything that happens, but I can choose how I approach it. I can keep looking for the positives, celebrate the small victories, support others who are walking a similar path and make the most of the time I have.

I am still Karen. I am still a wife, a mum, a nanny, a sister, a friend and a fighter. I still have adventures to enjoy and people to love.

And my attitude remains the same: **“Not happening on my watch.”**