

Phil Kerlake: Laughing, not Dancing

By Sue Claridge

If you'd had six battles with cancer, you might not feel much like laughing or dancing, but that's not really Phil's style. In fact, the title is a bit of an in-joke, really; I guess you had to be there – at the 2007 National breast cancer conference, that is. Phil's plenary session was called *How to Dance and Laugh Your Way to Recovery* and when he was introduced there was a comment about his dancing prowess. Phil issued strenuous denials regarding his ability and professed that he was “closer to Mr Bean than a stylish dancer.”

But he is into laughing and is an adherent of the adage that “laughter is the best medicine”. He has his own “laughter library” and laughter is just one of the measures that Phil recommends for dealing with the emotional and existential challenges that cancer patients face.

Phil “walks the talk”: he is a multiple-diagnosis cancer patient and has done a lot of research into the psycho-social aspects of recovering from cancer. Initially this was to aid his own recovery but in recent years he has written a book – *Life, Happiness ... & Cancer: Survive with Action and Attitude!* – and has spoken to thousands of cancer patients, caregivers, support and medical professionals throughout New Zealand. In June last year he won one of only three international, Roche-sponsored *Rebuilding Lives Awards 2007* in Austria for his inspiring survival journey and for his work in New Zealand cancer support.

The Cancer Patient

Phil was a fit and healthy 19 year old when he found out, by chance, that he had an incurable type of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. He was told he would have up to ten years to live. The doctors took a “wait and see” approach which didn't seem to Phil like much of a strategy. With few symptoms other than lumps and bumps on his body, the biggest challenges for Phil were the emotional ones.

He got on with his life and it wasn't until the late 1980's that his cancer progressed to stage IV disease and he had to deal with major health challenges that the cancer presented. It was at the age of 28 in 1987 that he had his first chemotherapy treatment. That treatment took him into 1988 when he had a relapse and another six months of chemotherapy. He then had a new diagnosis – Hodgkin's Lymphoma – and commenced radiotherapy.

In 1993-94 he had a localised relapse and was again treated with radiotherapy. This was followed by ten years of remission. His disease-free life was interrupted once again in 2003 with the formation of a lump in his abdomen. He was diagnosed again with stage IV disease, had another six months of chemotherapy, followed by a further relapse. This time he was treated with high dose chemotherapy, a stem cell transplant and a splenectomy.

Phil has had both Hodgkin's and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Although they are related diseases and present in similar ways, Phil is an unusual case in that he has had both. At 48 he has been in full remission for three years, feels really healthy and he and his wife, Gillian, have experienced the joy of having their first child, Rhys, born in July last year.

Living with Cancer

Phil has had to cope with cancer for three decades and has had plenty of experience with the psycho-social challenges that cancer presents. I asked him how you deal with repeated diagnoses and relapses on a psychological level.

“There were long periods of time between treatments and advanced disease,” he explains before saying that although he has become more philosophical over time, he is still aiming for a cure.

“I never thought I was going to die from cancer.”

“I think that if you can convince yourself deeply that you will make it, it has some benefit,” he says, adding that, “negativity can be a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Phil thinks that we can all work on what we believe. As a young man he was determined and stubborn, always taking on challenges with a high need for achievement. Although he doesn't know if he has always been an optimist, he says he becomes the ultimate optimist when the chips are down.

We discuss personality and cancer – which is interesting in light of research recently published. Phil read some of the work of Lydia Temoshock, a UK researcher who talks about emotional suppression. This struck a chord with Phil and later he referred to himself as someone who suppresses his emotions. Given how candid he is about his own experience, the psycho-social issues surrounding cancer and his role as a life-coach and speaker, he doesn't come across as an emotionally suppressed person. But perhaps that demonstrates the degree of personal growth his own battles have induced.

We also discussed Louise Hay's work in self-help. She believes that cancer is a disease of trapped resentment – that the patient causes his or her cancer through the way in which they deal with their own emotions and issues. Again, the latest research refutes this. Phil is not fond of laying the blame for cancer at the feet of the patient either, but does acknowledge that there are psychological and emotional aspects, and that personality contributes to a person's attitude and how that person responds to a battle with cancer.

Rebuilding a Life

Can cancer be good for you? It is a loaded question, because it is difficult to suggest that something that causes so much damage on so many levels, and for far too many can be a short path to death. Phil is not the first to suggest to me that cancer may have some benefits.

“Providing you survive it, it can be good for you,” he says.

It made him think about what he wanted out of life and has changed his life in positive ways. It was a great catalyst for him.

He used to be a general manager in the corporate world but his new life enables him to give something back. He wants to share what he has learnt on his own journey and life is now “infinitely more rewarding”.

“It is the life I should be living,” he says happily.

He does talk pro-bono, and earns a living as a life-coach.

“It pulls all my needs together,” he explains of his work.

And, of course there is his book. It came out of self-analysis – he wrote about what he knew best: coping with cancer, the fact that how he was feeling seemed to be contributing to outcomes. His experience was like one big laboratory.

He has also had a lot of contact with cancer patients – as you do when you spend time in cancer wards. It's a shared humanity.

“The people you come across in the cancer community,” he says, “are people at their best, at their most real.”

Phil has a strong sense of responsibility to the cancer patients he talks to and who read his book, and is very aware of the effect his words might have on them. He advocates that patients do their own research. He also says they need to nurture their relationships with their health professionals, but always ask questions, always take responsibility. He advocates for being an active, stroppy patient.

“Having a passion for life is important when you have cancer,” Phil says *with* passion. “Quality of life is all-important!”

Footnote from Phil: “In January 2009 I took up the position of General Manager, Human Resources at Hutt Valley District Health Board, based at Hutt Hospital. So now all my activities - paid and unpaid, are in health care, which is a perfect fit for me. I'm also in the process of writing my second book - an autobiography of my 30 years dealing with cancer so far (1979 - 2009)”.