Cancer roller coaster *of* hopes and fears

Three people living with the disease open up about the emotional highs and lows of their journey

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For many people, a cancer diagnosis marks the start of a difficult journey filled with uncertainty and fear, and sprinkled with hope.

But for those who face multiple relapses across many years, the battle can feel unending.

Beyond the physical side effects of repeated treatments, the emotional and psychological strain often runs deep: from coping with the threat of recurrence to adapting life plans around hospital visits to finding meaning in the midst of prolonged illness.

In Singapore, some patients have been living with cancer for more than a decade, navigating not just the disease itself, but also the long shadows it casts over their mental and emotional well-being.

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Like a marathon: Managing myeloma for 18 years

Mrs Chan Li Leng with her husband, Mr Paul Chan (left), and her doctor, Professor Chng Wee Joo (right). ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

For 70-year-old Chan Li Leng, living with multiple myeloma has meant a journey that has stretched nearly two decades.

This is far longer than the 10 years most patients typically face now. The average survival rate was about four years when Mrs Chan was first diagnosed in May 2007.

The retiree, who worked in the banking and finance sector, was diagnosed with multiple myeloma – cancer that forms in a type of white blood cell called a plasma cell – after sudden and severe back pain revealed three collapsed vertebrae.

She underwent vertebroplasty – a procedure in which bone cement is injected into a fractured vertebra – to stabilise her spine before starting targeted therapy.

Now an 18-year survivor, Mrs Chan recalls the early years as the hardest.

"The targeted drugs were overall effective, but my body was affected by the toxicities. I frequently succumbed to infections. It was a discouraging time as it was uncertain if the treatment was working. I was fatigued and physically weakened to the extent that I needed a wheelchair for a period of time," she says.

"The long-term use of steroids made me feel like I was on a roller coaster. There were days of steroid-high when I felt unusually productive, followed by days of extreme fatigue when I would crash. These highs and lows were emotionally troubling and led me to contemplate giving it all up."

What pulled her through was the steadfast care of her husband, Mr Paul Chan, 71, her faith and simple acts of respite.

"He would take me outdoors to the parks and beaches for fresh air and a change of environment. My faith also anchored me, helping me to persevere and not give up," says Mrs Chan, who has three children aged 43, 40 and 37.

While she managed to reach remission after eight years, her cancer marker resurfaced in July 2023 and the level rose further at the start of 2025.

Cancer fatigue, which is the emotional exhaustion that comes from living with the disease for so many years, is something she experiences.

"It's a mental challenge to not allow the frustrations to overwhelm you and keep you down. When I get bad news, I allow myself to 'grieve' over it for 48 hours. And then I tell myself to pull together and move on. Living with myeloma is a marathon, we have to pace ourselves," she says.

Her outlook reflects what her doctor, Professor Chng Wee Joo, senior consultant from the department of haematology-oncology at the National University Cancer Institute, Singapore, describes as a significant way of reframing the illness.

"The fact that it is incurable, with periods of remission and relapse, the need for long-term treatment, symptoms which may involve multiple systems, side effects that can be unusual and the possibly high cost of treatment are areas that make things emotionally difficult," Prof Chng says.

To soften the psychological blow of repeated relapses on patients, he compares the situation with chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes, which also are not curable but can be controlled with medications.

"I emphasise that myeloma is becoming more like a chronic disease rather than cancer. This helps to increase hope in patients, which is like a silver lining," he says.

Patients who experience cancer fatigue may become anxious, depressed or resigned, showing mood changes, frustration and loss of enjoyment.

"The key thing is hope," emphasises Prof Chng.

"With advancements in treatment, many patients can live long and relatively normal lives, and may well eventually die of other conditions rather than myeloma."

Mrs Chan has embraced hobbies such as knitting, painting and blogging, as well as outdoor activities like cycling and travel.

She also treasures spending time with her six grandchildren, all of them born after her diagnosis.

"Cancer makes me treasure each day. These years, watching my grandchildren grow up are my greatest joy," she says.

Beyond expectations: Decade with stage four lung cancer

Almost a decade after her stage four lung cancer diagnosis, Madam Sri Rahaju Djawoto, whose physician is Dr Tay Miah Hiang, takes targeted oral medication to keep her disease under control. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

When Madam Sri Rahaju Djawoto was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer in January 2016, she braced herself for the worst.

She asked Dr Tay Miah Hiang how much time she had left. The senior medical oncologist and chief executive of OncoCare Cancer Centre told her that his longest-surviving patient with a similar condition had lived for six years.

Madam Djawoto, then 55, wondered if she would live long enough to see her two daughters get married.

Nearly a decade later, at 64, she has witnessed the weddings of both her daughters, now 33 and 29.

She continues to live with advanced cancer, but targeted oral medication is keeping the disease under control.

"This is really beyond my expectations," says Madam Djawoto, a homemaker who is divorced.

Her journey, however, has been far from straightforward.

Over the years, she has had to switch medications several times as the cancer cells adapted, each change bringing new side effects ranging from stiff joints to rising cholesterol levels.

She underwent radiotherapy when the cancer spread to her bones, and hip replacement surgery after arthritis left her in pain.

Through it all, she leaned on strong support from her doctor, her family and her community.

Madam Djawoto, who was born in Jakarta and is a permanent resident in Singapore, has adjusted her daily life over time to manage the challenges.

Once sedentary, she now walks on a treadmill for up to an hour each day and also lifts light weights.

Living with cancer as a chronic condition, though, takes more than physical adjustments.

The emotional toll can be relentless. Patients often speak of "scanxiety" – the dread of waiting for test results that could signal a relapse.

For Madam Djawoto, perspective and acceptance have eased the fear. "I prefer to face the truth instead of living in denial. If I still can have more years ahead of me, it's a bonus. I've already lived beyond my expectation of six years," she says.

Dr Tay says that emotional ups and downs for patients are almost inevitable.

"Patients feel elation when the response is good, but feel sad and are worried when it turns poor. The idea of 'here we go again' rings in their minds."

He notes that it is uncommon for people with active cancer to survive as long as Madam Djawoto, but with better treatment options now, long-term survival for patients with active cancer is becoming common. For those who live beyond expectations, a tension often emerges between gratitude and fatigue.

Dr Tay advises patients to focus on short-term goals during treatment, such as achieving a positive response and rewarding themselves with an overseas trip, or aiming to celebrate milestones like a wedding or birthday.

Family, too, can be both a pillar of strength and a source of stress. While support is vital, overbearing involvement can stifle patients, he adds.

Respecting their choices and giving them space are just as important as encouraging them.

For Madam Djawoto, the decade-long journey has reshaped her view of time.

She no longer dwells on how many years remain, but on how best to live them.

"If I still have time, energy and strength, I want to use them to the fullest. I want to win the battle of this cancer life journey with triumph, not regrets," she says.

MORE on C2

FROM C1

Living with leukaemia: Toughest time was the initial fight to stay alive

In January 2021, Mr Andrew Carmichael's life took an unexpected turn.

During what he thought would be a routine health check, doctors told him his spleen was twice the normal size.

A blood test revealed a white cell count of 659,000 – far above the normal level of between 4,000 and 10,000 – leading to an immediate referral to Dr Kevin Tay, senior medical oncologist at OncoCare Cancer Centre.

Mr Carmichael, 59, recalls: "He was very clear. My blood test revealed that I had leukaemia. He said we needed to work quickly.

"He told me two nurses were going to take me to the intensive care unit (ICU) because we needed to start treatment immediately. Otherwise, there was a chance that I would die."

The period in ICU was intense.

"It was the darkest time. I had a very clear mental picture during that period, fighting to stay alive.

"It was like being in a dense forest with a sunlit clearing beyond it. I did not know the pathway, but I was determined to get there, to be with my wife Kelly again," says Mr Carmichael, who works in the project management division of a global corporate real estate services firm.

A bone marrow extraction from his hip confirmed chronic myeloid leukaemia, after which Mr Carmichael began oral targeted therapy.

Over the past five years, he has managed the condition with daily medication, adjusting to the long-term treatment and its impact on his daily life.

"The toughest time was the initial fight to stay alive. That required inner strength. Nothing else mattered but to fight from within," says Britain-born Mr Carmichael, who became a Singapore citizen in 2024.

Beyond this, his ongoing care involves blood checks and consultations with Dr Tay every six months, and support from his family and workplace.

Mr Andrew Carmichael (right), who was diagnosed with leukaemia in 2021, focuses on the life he can still live, strengthened by family bonds and a supportive medical team, including Dr Kevin Tay (left). ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

Living with leukaemia has strengthened Mr Carmichael's bonds with his family and given him an inner resilience.

Though he may look healthy on the outside, he now takes life's small irritations – like a noisy neighbour or work issues – in a calmer and more measured way.

Dr Tay describes the emotional challenges his patients face: "It is a chronic disease. Patients may feel fatigue from their treatment and condition.

"They may feel they are in a state of limbo, where they are neither sick enough to be terminal nor free enough to feel cured.

"There will be that chronic anxiety and stress, which may affect personal relationships or one's ability to commit to long-term goals."

For Mr Carmichael, who has two sons, aged 22 and 19, the constant reminder of illness is real.

"I can never fully relax or drop the medication, but the journey with Dr Kevin and his staff has been very clear," he says.

Even routine blood tests trigger some anxiety. "Strange that even though one knows that progress is being made from the daily medication and each blood test indicates progress, I always have a 'I hope the levels are lower than last time' thought," he adds.

Dr Tay says: "Many patients who cope well are not shackled by their cancers. Yes, the cancer is part of them, but it does not dominate their lives. They continue to live normally and find purpose in their daily lives."

Mr Carmichael's approach mirrors that advice. He focuses on the life he can still live, strengthened by family bonds and a supportive medical team.

"I feel lucky to be alive, thankful for the excellent medical and care staff, and lucky to have extended life with Kelly. The fight and daily medication were worth it, are worth it, every day."

7 TIPS FOR COPING WITH THE EMOTIONAL TOLL OF CANCER

When cancer becomes a long-term condition, life often revolves around cycles of treatment, recovery and monitoring.

"This ongoing vigilance can create a sense of being in 'survival mode', weighing heavily on one's mental health," says Dr Annabelle Chow, principal clinical psychologist of Annabelle Psychology.

She offers seven tips for coping with the emotional toll of cancer.

1. ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR FEELINGS
It is okay to feel sadness, fear or anger. Giving yourself permission to name these emotions can help lighten their weight.

2. REACH OUT FOR SUPPORT
You do not have to face this alone. Talk to someone you trust, whether a loved one, a close friend or a support group. Let him or her know how he or she can support you, even if it is just accompanying you to an appointment.

3. JOURNAL YOUR THOUGHTS
Writing down your thoughts and feelings can be a gentle release. Journals can hold both your worries and your moments of strength, giving you space to reflect.

4. BE GENTLE WITH YOURSELF
Take life step by step. Rest when your body asks for it and move at a pace that feels manageable.

5. NURTURE SELF-CARE
Simple activities such as listening to music, colouring, knitting or walking can bring calm. Remember to care for your body too, with rest, nourishing meals and moments to recharge.

6. STAY PRESENT WHEN YOU CAN
When worries about the past or future feel heavy, gently bring your attention back to this moment. Notice your breath, the warmth of a drink in your hands or the simple sensations around you.

7. SEEK PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT
Talking to a counsellor or therapist, or joining a support group can provide a safe space for you to share your worries and find new ways to cope. Asking for help is an act of strength, not weakness.