

Brain Tumour Awareness Month 2020: Introducing Vanessa

In Brain Tumour Awareness Month, we are recognising passionate people who are making a difference in brain cancer. Vanessa van den Berg is a senior ST brand manager, responsible for marketing several products in oncology and haematology. But, she has a very personal reason for making a difference in brain cancer.

“I’m a strong believer that our life-experiences prepare us for a greater plan. When we face challenges, we do not always see the bigger picture, but it always become apparent - almost like ‘joining the dots’.

In 1982 my mum was diagnosed with a brain tumour at the age of 38, raising 4 children and living a full life. As I was only 12 years old, this period had a lasting impact on my outlook on life.

Mum had her first surgery to remove the brain tumour and came out of the operation fairly well. Unfortunately, the tumour grew back within three months and when it did, it spread into an eloquent area of her brain and she went to hospital for further surgery.

The second surgery was more challenging, and we waited anxiously for over 20 hours. When we were allowed to see her, she could only say a few words and couldn’t remember or pronounce our names.

Our first language as a family is Afrikaans, however mum’s mother tongue was English. When she started speaking again a day or two later, she could only speak English and had to learn to speak Afrikaans again.





She had to undergo extensive whole brain radiation, which was still very much the treatment of choice in the early 1980's, however luckily no chemotherapy was required.

While she did recover, her speech was permanently affected and she couldn't express herself, especially if we teased her and made her angry. You never forget the shock of seeing your mother unable to speak, tears running down her cheek, as she tries to communicate.

Mum survived another eight years, when she died very suddenly of a brain aneurysm. The post-mortem showed that she had an aggressive leukaemia, which was most likely the underlying cause of this haemorrhage.

It was 12 years after Mum's death that I lost my Dad to mesothelioma as well, which ignited my passion even more to make a difference in the lives of cancer patients.

It is ironic that my professional life in the pharmaceutical industry has led me to work with oncology and haematology products - "joining the dots" of my life story.

When I work now, I think of the extra time new therapies can give patients, even if it is only a small amount of time. Time to walk down the aisle at a child's wedding, going on a last family holiday, getting married. I am passionate about extending life. I am passionate about the role I can play in offering patients hope.

From personal experience I can tell you, those few months can mean so much. Mum was there to raise us. I would do anything to have that time again. I would have done anything to have my mother at my wedding ten years later. My experiences have created my passion to help other people and their families.

During Brain Tumour Awareness Month, I would love to honour the health care professionals who make this possible and the patients living with brain cancer."

****Vanessa shared her story in May 2020.***