

Careers

Ill-health affected my career path but never kept me from the job I loved

Just when veterinary nurse **Victoria Bowes** felt life was complete, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Here, she shares some experiences of the treatment and the support that helped her return to work.

MY paternal grandparents owned a large sheep farm in Thirsk, Yorkshire – the area featured in James Herriot’s books. Their farm even got a mention in one of his stories. While growing up I always had animals around me.

It was during work experience in a veterinary practice that I found my dream job – veterinary nursing – I was hooked.

I loved the daily tasks, the routine and dealing with emergencies but, most of all, I enjoyed actively working with animals.

So, stepping away from clinical work after a failed knee replacement surgery (the last of many) was a tough decision. The pressure of kneeling and lifting was too much for me.

Career refocus

Not one to give up, I used the skills I had gained as an assessor and examiner and as a practice training manager to join Warwickshire College. Teaching the next generation of veterinary nurses was a good compromise.

MY CV

- Animal care course
- Part-time work in mixed practice
- Qualified as a veterinary nurse
- RCVS practical examiner
- VetsNow weekend locum
- A1 assessor training
- Emergency and critical care
- Nurse training manager in practice
- Teaching veterinary nursing
- City & Guilds examiner

Just when life seemed complete and my career was nicely balanced, I got the devastating news that I had stage 3 aggressive breast cancer. I was 30. It was a life-changing moment.

Within two weeks I had surgery and four weeks later I started chemotherapy.

Dealing with cancer can be lonely. Not many people understand what an isolating experience it can be, but I was lucky to have amazing support from my partner, family and friends.

As it turned out, at my first chemotherapy session, I met another veterinary nurse. It just goes to show that you’re not alone, even when it feels like it. My chemotherapy was completed over a six-month period. My training on infection control definitely helped me get through it without suffering from any infections involving my central line.

Keeping a sense of humour

Despite the seriousness of the situation, there were some lighter moments too. When I lost my hair, I went for a wig fitting and decided on a luscious, heavy blonde wig with lots of curls. It turned out to be an impractical choice.

On one hot day when I shook my head, the wig slipped down over my eyes, halfway down my face. My partner and I thought it was funny, so I placed the wig on our dog, Bernard, which made us laugh even more. Bernard, however, wasn’t so amused. From then on, I went wig free.



Victoria with ‘the boys’: Bernard (right) and Nero, the puppy bought for her by her mum when she finished her treatment



Nursing animals is what makes my heart beat

After chemotherapy, I completed six weeks of radiotherapy, going daily to the hospital, Monday to Friday.

Support for body and mind

There were many forums and cancer support charities on-hand throughout my treatment and after it.

I particularly benefited from two. Look Good Feel Better helps people manage the visible side effects of cancer treatment. It helped me feel beautiful even though I was bald, and it provided me with various beauty tutorials and treatments.

The other was CoppaFeel, which educates women about the importance of checking their breasts. Volunteering to support this cause provided me with a route to channel my frustration and cope with moments of anger about my situation.

Once the treatment was finished, getting back into real life was unexpectedly difficult. I found this disconcerting as I'd never struggled with fear and anxiety before my illness.

One tendency of cancer patients is that every cough or moment that you feel unwell may be interpreted as a signal that the cancer has returned.

It was hard to deal with these feelings – I would describe it as almost like grieving for who I had been before my illness, while getting to know the new me.

I was helped through this period by a clinical therapist and got further help from my Macmillan nurse who referred me to my local charitable hospice as a day patient.

Honestly, walking through the door of the hospice was one of the hardest things I have ever done, but I'm so glad I did. The staff made me feel like a queen.

It was here that I was offered diversional therapy and I took the opportunity to learn new artistic skills. The day I handed my mum a silk painting I had made, she nearly keeled over because I had never done anything like it before: it was a special moment.

The chemotherapy left me with permanent nausea, so the hospice staff also helped me to have a better relationship with food. This is still a struggle for me and my partner has researched lots of ideas to help me eat.

Getting back to work

After a year as a day patient, benefiting from physiotherapy, counselling and holistic therapy, I returned to work – a crucial part of recovery. My employer worked with me to organise a phased return into teaching. And my colleagues provided empathy and care throughout my illness. They continue to do so.

I even managed to return to my role as an emergency and critical care locum, but it proved to be shortlived because secondary immune deficiency (caused by the cancer treatment) put me at risk of serious infection.

On the plus side, as my confidence returned, I took on some other roles, focusing on inspiring the next generation of veterinary nurses. I'm also a pre-registration examiner for RCVS veterinary nursing overseas candidates.

For anyone with a similar diagnosis, my advice would be to follow the instructions of your clinical team. Ask questions of them and don't be tempted to search Google.

Use the help that's available, including the RCVS Mind Matters Initiative.

Don't have regrets about things you haven't done, and make a pact with yourself to experience some of them when you can.

Although my health continues to be a challenge, and despite what I've been through, I feel lucky to have lived the life I wanted to and thoroughly enjoyed it.

Veterinary nursing remains my absolute passion and being able to help future VNs achieve their potential is what makes me tick.



My passion for nursing hasn't changed

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