

# “Jump-Start Your Life.®

Despite  
Having a  
Brain  
Tumour

A Message of Love, Faith & Hope

By

**Helen Mirzoian**

My name is Helen Mirzoian and I live in Sydney, Australia. I am 47 years old, married and have 2 young children.

Sometime ago in early 2003, I took my children to see their grandparents and left them there while I did my shopping. Whilst I was walking through a supermarket, I felt something strange happen to my right leg – I could barely walk on it and another shopper was looking at me strangely... About 30 seconds later I was fine again and could walk 'normally'. I didn't say anything to my in-laws or to my husband as I thought it was a one-off incident.

A few months later I was in another shopping centre and bumped into my cousin. We were talking and catching up and all of a sudden I could not talk – I was listening to her but when she asked me a question, I tried to answer her but my mouth would not move. With a puzzled and concerned look on her face she kept asking me "are you OK?" but I couldn't answer; she put her arm around me and within one minute I was able to respond to her question and talk again. I told her that I was just amazed as she was. Nothing like that had happened to me before. Still with a concerned look on her face she said "Perhaps you are very tired, taking care of two small children and looking after a house... it's exhausting. You may need a break." She then gave me a hug and we both moved on with our shopping.

When my husband got home that evening, I had to tell him what strange experiences I was having... he insisted we should see the doctor right away. When the doctor heard about what was happening to me in the past few months, he strongly suggested that I consult with a Neurologist just to make sure that nothing serious was going on and that everything was fine. Within a week or so I

met with the Neurologist and he informed me that an MRI scan would be necessary in order to better diagnose my condition.

I remember my first MRI scan in August 2003... My in-laws insisted on coming with me and later together we would drive over to the day care centre to pick up my children.

The MRI itself took only about 20 minutes, and once it was over I thought that I could just leave and wait to hear the report from the Neurologist. But that wasn't the case. I was asked by the nurse to wait for one of the doctors to 'review' the MRI.

I didn't know then but it was a way for them to keep me 'positive' so the doctor could tell me what was in the report: "you have a brain tumour and it is about 5cm on your left side - which affects the right side of your body." I was in shock; it felt like I was having a bad dream and wanted to wake up and say to myself that it was a dream, and it can't be true... but it was.

I left the room; still feeling astounded but thought these doctors must have confused my MRI with someone else's. Then I told my in-laws and their immediate response was "it may just be something that doctors can fix, but don't worry. It's going to be ok." To this day, my father-in-law always says that I was brave on that day and as I drove the car to pick up my kids without getting upset or crying.

Once I got home, I called my husband and told him about the MRI and that it was showing a tumour in my brain. He was quiet for a few seconds as he couldn't believe it either... it wasn't something that 'we' wanted in our lives.

After a follow up visit with my Neurologist, he prescribed Dilantin tablets to stop what he called 'seizures' (which I'm still taking now). He suggested that I visit couple of Neurosurgeons to further explore the options available to me.

The Neurosurgeon explained that it was a low grade *benign* tumour (astrocytoma) on the left side of my brain and can be taken out with a craniotomy. But where it is located, he would need to do an 'awake surgery' which means that I would be awake during the surgery and they can speak to me whilst removing segments of the tumour and knows when he is close to risking me of losing my ability to speak or walk. If he takes it all out while I am fully asleep, then I would lose the ability to use my right side - including walking and speech. Following that meeting, I set out to explore 2 other Neurosurgeons' opinions who were more inclined to take the whole tumour out and they also agreed that I would have problems on my right side such as walking, my right hand and speech difficulties... so I decided to stay with my first surgeon's option. 'Awake surgery' was going to be the way to go.

The decision to have the surgery was not an easy one for me and my family. I have lived a very active life. Travelling, working as a public relations officer and writer for a large telecommunications company in Australia where I had met, interviewed and photographed hundreds of staff members, wrote stories about them and the projects they were working on. Often I met with foreign visitors who were in town for conferences. And now I am going to risk not being able to walk or talk!

While waiting for the surgery date which was to be sometime in early 2004, we were looking forward to the

Christmas period. My husband decided that I, the kids and my mother-in-law should take some timeout and fly to Los Angeles and have a great time together before the operation. He wanted us to visit the family, enjoy new experiences with the kids and have a great winter Christmas for a change. And you know what, we did!

It was a wonderful time, connecting with old friends and seeing the kids' US cousins and visiting places like Malibu, Disneyland, Lego Land, Sea World and so much more. My mother-in-law and I visited a well known hair dresser in Beverly Hills and got ourselves hip haircuts! We were gone for 6 weeks and I missed my husband (and so did the kids). My mother-in-law was enjoying every single day as she was spending time with her daughter Silva, her brother and other family members who live in Los Angeles... but my father-in-law couldn't wait for her to come home!



We finally landed back in Sydney and all was well, then...

The operation was getting near and my Neurosurgeon asked that I have another test – a Pet scan (a Neurological Study) before I went in for the operation. It was to be taken very early in the morning at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney where I would be in a room with 'electrodes' on my head (basically buttons stuck to my head) for almost 45 minutes. The nurses were great as they kept me as ease. "Take a nap" they said "or think of the good things in your life." When this was finished, I

was taken for a quick MRI scan and was ready to leave the hospital. But I was told not to get too close to anybody or share my bottle of water until that evening. I was very nervous about hugging my kids when they got home from school.

Then the operation day came. The night before going into The Royal North Shore Hospital, it was hard for me to sleep. I kept telling myself that all would be OK and to not worry as the surgeon knows what he is doing. I kept thinking about the family and how they were also with me – now and after the operation. Then I fell asleep.

In February 2004, just after Valentine's Day, I had my first operation. Eerily I was not nervous as they took me into the surgery and gave me needles. The hospital staff kept asking if I was alright and I answered "yes".

Everything went well for my operation. I can't remember how many hours I was in the theatre but I know what they mean by an 'awake operation'. Sometimes they had me 'awake' and sometimes they would put me to 'sleep'.

When it was all over, they were taking me out of the theatre and all of a sudden I was feeling nauseous. But the anaesthetist was there and he quickly gave me an injection and I was fine to go to the Intensive Care Unit. My husband was impatiently waiting for me at the ICU as he was very worried about me. My in-laws, my mum and dad and even my uncle and aunt were also there. I recall seeing tears in my mother's eyes. A couple of hours later, my 2 brothers, my sister and her husband came to see me but they could only stay at the ICU for 5 minutes.

They had shaved the left side of my head and lifted the skull to get access to the tumour... Amazing what they can do these days. The nurses continued to monitor me and always ask me questions such as: "What's your name?" "What date were you born?" "What is today's date" "Which hospital are you in?" "Do you know why you are here?" I kept getting them wrong except for my name. It was the hospital's way to assist me in my speech and memory.



I was in hospital for 7 days and it was touching and assuring seeing my family and good friends who came to see me and make me laugh – people that I had not expected to see showed up. Supporting a scarf to cover up my scars, no one almost knew the difference? I was also lucky that my sister-in-law,

Silva, came to Sydney from Los Angeles to spend time with the kids and the family.

While at home the number of visitors did not end. It was great to see how they were praying for my well being. I was lucky to have my mother and mother-in-law always there to help make food and take care of me (and the kids) as my husband had to go to work. And I was fortunate to have Silva around as well as she stayed with us and I'll never forget the first time that I was actually able to have a shower. She put a chair in the shower so I can sit, and she helped me to get all that gooey stuff off my head after the operation. It was great to have a clean and washed hair again.

Only family and close friends were aware of the tumour surgery, and more people heard about the surgery, more

and more people called and visited. People at times forgot that I just had a major surgery and I didn't have the energy to speak

or visit for a long time. I remember once when one of my cousins and his wife came to see me, we were having a great conversation and then whilst talking I had a small 'seizure' and it was hard for me to speak – luckily my husband held my hand and gave them my answer.

## Follow Up:

After a couple of weeks I visited my Neurosurgeon, I was delighted to hear that I didn't need any radiotherapy as everything was looking 'good' and he would only recommend it if the tumour was growing. Hearing that was encouraging and both my husband and I were thrilled. We thought all would be good as it was only a 'tumour'... but then I remember the Neurosurgeon telling us that it is a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade tumour and it may grow later on and become a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade tumour... *(If it becomes malignant, it will become a cancer.)*

## Healing:

For the next 6 months I was not able to drive. My children were at early years of school and my husband would take them every morning. In the evening my sister or aunt would pick them up and bring them home. Finally when my Neurologist said I can drive,

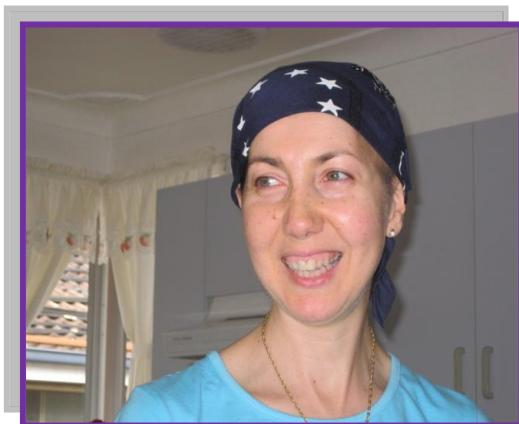


it was good to get around and do my shopping, see my parents and my in-laws. I also remember a friend who came to the hospital and said a prayer for me before the operation; she kept talking about a place where she goes to pray and eventually I went there. It was a Born Again Church and I remember going twice and it was a great feeling but... I knew it wasn't for me, even though I believe in the Bible. Another good friend also took me to people's homes where they have prayer sessions – again I went twice but that wasn't for me either.

I was given MRI's every seven or eight months without a sign of the tumour growing, so life seemed fine.

## **Follow up treatment:**

Four years after my operation, one of the MRI's showed the tumour was growing and my Neurosurgeon said that he recommended radiotherapy. First I had another PET scan and then decide on whether I wanted the radiotherapy. My husband and I went to see a radiotherapy specialist and we asked him so many questions about the procedure and what it can do for 'me'. He was a nice elderly surgeon and we finally decided to go ahead with it.



Radiotherapy was for 6 weeks and, since I wasn't sure how it would affect my abilities, I was lucky that my husband and then thankfully my wonderful sister drove me there. Later on, I realised that it wasn't as cumbersome or stressful as I thought that it would be, I could have done it myself but it was nice having someone with me.

## Side effects:

At that stage, I was working part-time in a completely different role of being an administrative officer for a small Accounting firm close to home. There were only three employees and the owner and I had a set of keys to open the door if there was no one inside or close it if I was last to leave. I soon realised that I was losing my hair... I met a great woman in the city (Sydney) who made wigs for elderly people. When she heard what I had been through, she made a lovely wig and gave me a big discount!

I started wearing it and all was going fine and then one morning before I got into the Accountant's building, I was desperate in going to the bathroom and was still waiting for the elevator. I finally got to the door, which was always open but this time it was closed and with all the lights off – nobody was there! By the time I got out my keys I couldn't control myself and I got 'wet' before opening the door and running to the bathroom. My trousers and underwear were 'wet' and I couldn't stay at work in that condition. I quickly turned off all the lights and locked the door; then I went home to clean myself up. Later I called my boss who already knew what I was going through (with the wig on my head, etc) and informed him that I could not work for him at the moment. He was nice and understood my reasons.

So, now I wasn't working anymore and I was still getting that 'urge' to go to the bathroom all the time. I glanced through the radiotherapy brochures we had brought home to see if the radiotherapy had an effect... and yes it did. Called Pelvic Floor Muscle Training for Women, I had to do a series of these exercises throughout the day and thank goodness all went well and I no longer experienced the urgent rushes.

Soon after I stopped using the wig and finally decided to get a short haircut and it looked great. I wanted to take care of myself, so I started doing Yoga lessons.



## Focusing on my Health:

Later on I began researching on the Internet for any new therapies and or resources to help improve my health. I found a good Nutritionist and went to see him. He recommended some tablets and juiced vegetables, as well as fish oil and flaxseed oil. He also gave me a 3-page sheet about healthy eating which I still keep in my kitchen draw. I am still taking the tablets.

Then I discovered a book by an Australian woman called Katrina Ellis. I loved it back then and I still refer to it now. While she was working in Thailand she heard about the 150 Thai construction workers who, while digging up the local runway to build a new airport, had uncovered containers of toxic chemicals which had been buried years ago at the end of the Vietnam War. These chemicals have now been linked to birth defects, serious illness, health problems and cancer. Sadly, when she came back to Australia, she discovered that she had cancer too and had to be admitted into hospital.

She had resisted having the operation at first but the doctors strongly suggested that it was necessary. She agreed, but after the operation she refused eating the hospital food that was served to her. Her family were always there and they sat in the back room juicing

fresh fruits and vegetables for her until she was ready to leave.

The book was another way of helping me treat my tumour with traditional and natural therapies. It talked about the juices I could have, breakfasts I can eat, various main courses and sweets – so it was good for me to try them, and I did. But I found it hard to offer them to my husband and kids, so I got sick of making two meals but was still careful about what I ate. I slowly started eating a bit of meat (even though the book said '*organic chicken*') and was also eating a bit of cake and biscuits prior to sleeping – I thought it couldn't harm me.

I became more interested in finding ways to cure tumours, I explored many sites via the Internet and I remember my mother suggested that a good friend of hers had tried a strange combination of honey, scotch whiskey and fresh Aloe Vera (and I remembered that I had seen a mention of this on the Internet). So my mum and I prepared it and I started drinking it throughout the day and then I remade it and took it again. Not sure, but I think none of these things helped me.

## Say It Isn't So:

I was not expecting anything to happen in February 2012. I did another one of my routine MRI's and as normal, followed up with my Neurosurgeon who uttered the dreaded word "the tumour is growing again and you need to have another PET scan, an operation and this time also *chemotherapy*..." My husband and I were in shock and as you can imagine very upset but it didn't really hit us until we got home and I kept asking "Why in almost 9 years has it come again?"

Then I cried and so did my husband! But then I stood up and said *"Well, we've been through it before and we can go through it again"*.

In late June 2012, I once again prepared myself for my 2<sup>nd</sup> operation, but this time the doctors were constantly delaying the date. Then I found out that to my surprise, my own Neurosurgeon was ill and couldn't do the operation for another 3 months but as I needed it urgently, he referred me to another surgeon who could do the operation.

This time, I was a little more prepared as I had gone through it once already... but then not knowing what the outcome and the results would be, we were very nervous and hopeful at the same time.

## Repeat Performance - Almost:

I had my 2<sup>nd</sup> operation – they shaved the left side of my head again, and lifted the skull. This time, after the surgery was over, I chose to wear a hat (instead of a scarf). The bright side this time was that my room had an amazing view of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and



I only needed to stay for 5 days and I seemed to be fine without getting 'seizures' as I did the first time around.



My husband and family were always by my side. And it was so uplifting to have them and friends visit me, as they did when I got home. My kids had baked a special welcome home cake for me. It is so great having great friends and family members helping me out when I got home; even friends were constantly bringing me food and cooking all the things that I liked. Also, my sister-in-law Silva came to Sydney especially for me and stayed at our home while the kids were off on their winter holiday. This time,

there was no gooey stuff on my head that she had to help wash off!!! Well just a little, not as much as last time.

One thing I remember well after this 2<sup>nd</sup> operation is that Silva had asked the surgeon about my operation and what to expect in the future... he basically told her that this time, I had about 5-10 years to live. It is a stage 4, Cancer, but fortunately, it is a primary tumour.. Well, that's not what I wanted to hear; I wanted him to say that it's all ok, and she will live a longer life! My children are both in High School (one is turning 15 and the other is 13) and I want to see them grow, get married, have children – so that I can become a grandmother!

It has been over 7 months and I still haven't driven since June 2012. Recently, I was in my Oncologist's office talking about the chemotherapy I was taking. A phone call came in and she was about to tell the

caller that she couldn't talk... but once she got on, I knew something was happening.

The caller apparently has terminal cancer and was exploring the possibility of travelling overseas to try a different treatment... but the doctor did not think she will be alright to go as she didn't think that she will survive the journey. After the call, the doctor turned to me and said "don't worry about the call as you are here in my office for YOU and how to make YOU better."

## How I Continue to Enjoy My Life Now?

So, I am still taking Dilantin, chemotherapy (Astromide, Procarbazine & Zofran tablets) and my Nutritionist's tablets and I feel OK. At first the Oncologist gave me Astromide and Zofran tablets for 5 days every 28 days... but the tumour was still growing. She quickly changed the dosage (with different intake levels) for 14 days on and 14 days off... The chemotherapy was starting to work.

The last 2 MRI's showed that the tumour was shrinking. It was a blessing for me and my husband. I really was prepared for the worst based on stories that I had heard about taking chemotherapy, but I am extremely lucky to have



missed the ugly side effects of the process. I am enjoying my life, every single day.

## Talk To Me With Joy!

I want people to ask me (in a positive way) "how are you Helen?" and I can let them know that I am fine. We need to be reminded that we are still alive and here. We still need joy. So often we hear about this disease with a heavy heart.

Recently, an old friend of mine was also diagnosed with a brain tumour and her operation was through her nose, without cutting into her scalp. A few months later, she told me she was having radiotherapy all in one day! I had never heard of 'all in one day' as mine was done over a 6 week period... but she too is always positive and I so enjoy talking with her.

I have another friend who has moved to Brisbane and she often communicates via Skype... recently while on video I noticed that as she was smiling that there was something different about her face. She soon told me that recently she had been diagnosed with a breast cancer and in order for it not to spread to other parts of her body she needed to take chemotherapy *injections*. She has just begun the procedure and it seems that it is affecting her strongly. I am praying for her well being.

## Why I am sharing my story with you?

I have seen statistics showing more than 69,720 new cases of primary brain tumours are expected to be diagnosed this year (2013). This does not mean that people stop living just because they have been diagnosed... the tumour does not have you, you have it.

Despite the shock of having to deal with it, it is very important that we remain positive and continue to surround ourselves with uplifting, positive and energizing people.

I know that being in a positive state of mind has helped me stay focused on being well. All the resources and activities that can help us deal with this disease will come to us with a day-by-day attitude. Living for the NOW takes a whole new meaning in your life when you have been diagnosed with tumour/cancer.



In the mornings I hear the birds singing and I know it is time to wake up. Once my kids are off to school, I have my breakfast which includes yoghurt or soy milk then I do Yoga in my living room or take myself for a 20-minute walk around the block. Then I do all the things that I enjoy, such as taking care of my home including preparing lunch and dinner for my family, and of course researching on the Internet about my condition. The only thing different is that I am still not allowed to drive after my last surgery. But then again

I don't miss it too much right now. I enjoy being at home, receiving calls from my friends and family, occasionally having dinner made by my mum or mother-in-law; if I need to go anywhere, there will be someone who can take me and bring me back.

**[Via this link](#), I will continue to share my updates, findings and positive resources that can perhaps bring joy and hope to your life, your friends or your loved one who may be dealing with a similar situation. I truly enjoy my life with my family every day. None of us know how much time we have on this earth.**

**Speak soon and look forward to also hearing back from you. Let's support and inspire one another.**

**Love,**

*Helen Mirzorian*

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