

# Cling to the dream

If anyone has 'grace under pressure', it's Sarah Dickinson. Sarah has ovarian cancer and has faced the threat to her future with honesty, humour, and a determination to help others. 'I was pleased to read the article on ovarian cancer in *Good Housekeeping*,' she wrote. 'There is little awareness of this disease and a real lack of support.'

I am 31 years old, have a daughter of 3, and a loving husband. I have led a charmed life. I had a very happy, loving childhood, graduated from Cambridge with a degree in botany, trained as a science teacher, and started a career in environmental education. I am active and attractive and love to live. The greatest inconvenience of my life is having ovarian cancer. Over the past two years, I have lived with and come to terms not only with the effects of surgery and painful clinical examinations, but with practical considerations such as finding clothes that won't rub the scar that runs like a fat worm down my front and needing a fun, go-faster short haircut to counter the effects of chemo. I must live for the present, yet prepare for an uncertain future because the doctors have told me I have only another year to live.

Last summer, we all spent three adventure-packed months sailing round the Greek islands, fulfilling a dream. Unfortunately, the dream wobbled when, morning after morning, I woke with a pounding head, vomiting every 20 minutes. We had a silent agreement to cling to the dream for as long as possible, delaying our return to the reality of London, with its hospitals and chemotherapy.

For me, the hardest part is to leave my child, for she is my joy. It's heartbreaking to know my sweet Michèle must grow and face the bitter-sweet of life without a mother. My own mother died suddenly when I was 5, so I understand what Michèle will have to face, and my heart breaks when I picture her without her Mummy.

She will have no real memory of me, so I write for her and prepare special photo albums. I can leave her the message that I cared so very much, and would have

been there if only I could. My cancer was detected during my pregnancy, and I thank God that it wasn't diagnosed immediately or Michèle would not exist. In the last two years I have had several operations, including surgery to re-route my bowel, and chemotherapy which made me feel quite lousy. I have now started a new, triple drug course of chemo.

The amazing thing is that it all feels quite normal. This weird body with its tubes, bags and scars is mine, and my wonderful husband loves it as much as ever. Our love goes way beyond the physical in a deep bond that keeps us laughing and enjoying. I will live forever in the minds and souls of Adrian and Michèle, and they will go onwards without me. And there is always the hope that the big guys at the Royal Marsden Hospital will buy me time. I have been so impressed by them. They have always respected my intelligence, making sure I have sufficient knowledge to make an informed decision about my treatment.

To treat or not to treat? 'Success' means a reduction in the disease, not a cure. I am unfortunate that my disease did not respond to the first course of chemotherapy. There is a small chance it may be slowed by the second and that I will enjoy a few healthy months in the summer. And there is an even smaller chance it may respond well and I could have a good year. For the possible gift of giving Michèle her fourth birthday party, I accepted the chemo.

I am extremely lucky that I have a



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Sarah, with husband Adrian and daughter Michèle

very supportive family and fantastic friends. However, I know from experience not everyone can cope with a sick person, and friends can retreat when you need them most. The very mention of cancer is alarming.

In England, there are no support groups for women with ovarian cancer. Perhaps it would be possible to start one, connecting sufferers by phone, fax, E-mail and post. If any women, family members or supporters would like to join me in this, let me know. We could raise money for research and equipment; we could talk, help each other, and know we are not alone.

Meanwhile, I look forward to sailing this spring, and feeling the summer sun. I take pleasure and strength from my friends, who are always there for me. With them I can weep and share my pain. But more – with them, I can keep laughing.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

Sarah would like to set up a support group for everyone affected by ovarian cancer – sufferers, families and friends. If you can help in any way, write to GH/Cancer Support, 72 Broadwick St, London W1V 2BP.

BACUP runs advice lines (0171-613 2121; 0800-181199). Its Gala Recital, in London on Valentine's Day, features opera singer Susan Daniel, who has survived ovarian cancer. Tickets cost £75, including dinner with wine; ring 0171-696 6003. A CD of her arias costs £11.99 from Conifer Records (01895-447707) – £1 from each sale goes to BACUP.