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# That's Life!

ISSUE #2 October 13, 2008  
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Today, I'm making the most of life

# A mind to SURVIVE

## A rare and dangerous tumour left Melissa with one last throw of the dice – brain surgery while awake

Melissa Neal, 35, Lismore, NSW

I felt my eyelids droop as I packed the last item on the supermarket shelf at work. It was only 11am but I couldn't fall asleep.

It'd been the same for months. I've not 21 any more, I thought. But as the morning went on, I started feeling hot. Is it warm in here? I asked my colleague, Lena. Before she had chance to answer, everything went black.

The next thing I knew I was waking up in Lismore Hospital. My head hurts, I moaned to my partner Mark, 38. You had a seizure, he said gently. The doctors need to run tests.

With him were my daughters Lisa, 16, and Samantha, 13. Don't worry, I said, reaching for their hands. I'll be fine.

I had blood tests and brain scans over the next three days. Getting up after one CT scan,

I caught a glimpse of my brain on the screen. 'What's that?' I gasped. There was a huge black ball in the middle of my brain.

Your doctor will tell you tomorrow, the radiographer said, closing the image.

Shaking, I went back to the ward. I don't think it's good, I sobbed to Mark. Let's see what the doctor says, he said.

The waiting was agonising. When the doctor arrived the next day, I hadn't slept.

It's bad, isn't it? I gasped. You're sorry but you have a tumour in your brain called a cavernoma, he said. It's very rare and its positioning in the centre of your brain means it's too dangerous to remove. There isn't anything more we can do.

Although I'd expected the worst, the bad news was still a huge shock. The room started spinning and I wanted Mark. The doctor explained that the tumour would slowly reduce

my ability to move. You've got about two years, he added.

I was only 34. How could I tell my daughters their mum was going to die? I had so many questions but I knew if I started speaking, I'd burst into tears. Walking out of the consulting room, I fell into Mark's arms.

I'm going to die, I choked. 'What?' he gasped.

All I could do was cling to him and sob.

As there was nothing doctors could do I was discharged from hospital. Mark and I drove home in silence. I have to get a second opinion, I said suddenly. Let's take one thing at a time, Mark soothed.

At home, my girls were waiting. It's a tumour, I said. Lisa stared at me blankly. But it's not the end, right? I shook my head. I'll fight it!

That night I leapt on the net and made appointments with neurologists across Australia. Over the following months I visited many consultants but each said the same thing. It's too dangerous to operate.

Time was running out. I'd started having seizures three to four times a week and could

never be alone. I also couldn't speak properly and my writing was suffering.

I don't know what else to do, I sobbed to my family.

'We'll find a way,' Mark said. Samantha squeezed my hand. We're here for you, Mum.

I soldiered on and in February I stumbled across a web page for an Australian doctor. It had information about my condition and clearly stated the treatment as surgery. Scanning the site, I saw Dr Khurana, in Canberra, was willing to operate on high-risk cases like mine.

'Write to him,' Mark urged. A little part of me dared to hope and by the end of the day I had posted off a letter.

Two weeks later I finally received a reply. Ripping open the envelope, I rushed through the letter. Then, putting it down, I burst into tears.

'You've got about two years,' the doctor said

## Craniotomies & cavernomas

A cavernoma is a rare tumour that grows inside the blood vessels in the brain. It can be fatal, depending on where it grows. Awake craniotomy is brain surgery that requires the patient to be awake during the procedure to ensure the tumour is removed without other disturbances to the brain. Dr Khurana's team at Canberra Hospital is one of the few in Australia to perform this surgery.



Back home with my dear Samantha



'It's not good is it?' Mark choked. 'No!' I screamed. 'It's great! He's agreed to operate!'

A few weeks later I was sitting in Dr Khurana's office with my dad Jim, 80, and mum, Maureen, 57.

'If your brain was real estate, this tumour would be sitting on millionaire's row,' he explained.

He told me that the tumour was in the area of the brain that acts as a switchboard for the whole body. 'We can operate, but you'll need to be awake. If you're awake we can ensure we're not disrupting any other part of your brain.' Mum looked shocked but I nodded. 'What

else can we do it?' I said.

I didn't care the surgery was high risk or that I'd be awake. I just wanted my tumour out.

Two weeks later, on May 15, my family and I travelled down to Canberra, and I went into the hospital alone. I was scared and didn't want my girls to see me that way. *It's your only hope*, I told myself.

Dr Khurana's assistant talked me through the op. It would take four hours and I'd be awake for around 35 minutes. 'We give you a drug after which will make you forget the surgery,' he explained. 'Remembering it would be too traumatic.'

I nodded nervously. *I don't know if I can go through with this*, I thought.

But then I thought of my family. I had to do it for them.

Suddenly I was wheeled to the operating room. The surgery was about to begin.

Doctors in masks surrounded me and blinking under the bright lights I saw a line of terrifying-looking metal instruments.

This is so scary, I thought, wanting to burst into tears. 'You're in capable hands,' the nurse reassured me.

From that moment on my memory is hazy. From the medical reports I know I was secured to the bed and six pins were screwed into my skull to keep my head still.

At various times I was told to talk and move to ensure the instruments weren't hitting the wrong part of my brain as they probed the tumour.

The only thing I can clearly remember is a large screen and hearing Dr Khurana's voice saying, 'Now we can suction.' He started removing the tumour and I remember that moment.

I woke the next morning a bit woozy. 'Do you remember the operation?' Mark asked. 'Only tiny segments. I guess the drugs really work,' I replied.

But I had a 12cm scar and a shaved head to remember the procedure by. 'You still look beautiful,' Lisa smiled.

After a day of tests, Dr Khurana came in, beaming. 'We got it all!' he announced.

He said the tumour had been about 5cm wide. 'We don't know what caused it,' he told me. 'It may have been slowly growing since birth but now it's out, it's highly unlikely to grow back.'

'You're my hero,' I smiled. I was in hospital for eight days and on May 23, Mark took me home. Gradually I started feeling better. My seizures stopped and I had more energy.

Now, four months on, I'm working again. Last month we even had a big night out for Lisa's birthday. I'm so happy I fought to have my tumour removed. Dr Khurana and his team saved my life and now I'm going to live it to the full. ■

As told to Kerrie Jeffrey



Me, Lisa and Mark in July this year

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