

Transcript

Being diagnosed with melanoma

Dr Wendy McInally:

Now we're on to the second podcast, which is all around diagnosis, Jack. So, could you tell me, please, how and where your diagnosis was given?

Jack Brodie:

Yes, so as I said before, I went a couple of times, back and forth to the GP. So, I was unsure, at that time, if this was something that a GP would tell me what it is. I think, in the past, I would maybe refer to them to things with my skin. But at that point, I was obviously referred on to dermatology, which was a specialist place to get your skin seen, too.

And we went there, and I ended up getting what's called a small excision. So, they took a small area of the skin around where the mole was, and took the mole out, and then they did a biopsy on the mole to see if there was any sort of cancerous cells in there. And then about a week later, we were called back. And at that point, I thought they were going to do a check on the stitches [LAUGHS] and see how the stitches were healing. But when I went back in, I was actually told that this wasn't just a spot and it was something called a melanoma.

And I remember, at that time, . being so unsure of what the word "melanoma" meant that, eventually, I had to sort of stop the doctor and say, what is a melanoma? And it was at that point that they said that it was a form of skin cancer, which was obviously a massive shock. It was something that, as we talked about in the first episode, that I wasn't very aware that this was something that happened in young people. And above that, I lived in Scotland. So, I thought, to get this, you'd probably have to be somewhere sunny. So, it was a massive shock that I had been hit with this diagnosis, with a form of skin cancer.

So that was where I found out, in the dermatologists in Edinburgh. But I suppose, off the back of that, Wendy, the one thing that I remember thinking, quite consciously, at the time, was, is this a common way for it to happen? I wasn't sure if I should have been back and forth to the GP.

Should I have found out there? Should I have gone to the dermatologist? Is it quite common for people to go to dermatology and find out these things? Or is there sometimes other ways that people find out about melanomas?

Dr Wendy McInally:

Well, that's a very good question, Jack, because there's many young people, as you know, that, like yourself, maybe don't show their mother or who they're living with at the time, a carer, or maybe their flatmates, or what have you. They just think, oh, I'll put something on this and it'll disappear. Or it might be that they've gone to a beautician or they've been to the hairdresser, and it's the hairdresser that says, oh, I think you really need to get that looked at because it's really quite black and nasty looking. Usually, at that stage, they either take themselves, like you did, to their GP or they go straight to a dermatology outpatient clinic and are seen there. So that's the usual ways that the diagnosis is usually, eventually given because as you know, as you've said, they have to do a biopsy and what have you.

The problem with the GP, especially within our country, is that not many GPs will see melanoma in young people or, indeed, in the, sort of, young adult, as it were. I mean, I think I said to you, at the

beginning, my brother was 32 when he first started going to his GP. And he went back about six times, until the GP actually then decided to take it off. It didn't do a very good job because GPs are not trained in the same way as surgeons are within a dermatology department or, indeed, a dermatologist. Left him with quite a nasty scar, but it did come back with a positive result.

And it was then that patients normally usually have to go and have a bigger excision and debridement. Because if it's gone further into the layers of the skin or the muscle, indeed, then you end up with infiltration of the disease and, unfortunately, sort of, a later stage of the disease, which can be quite hard to treat sometimes, as we've talked about before, Jack. So, an answer to your question, a normal diagnosis is given in a dermatology outpatient district general hospital, not usually a specialist cancer hospital. But if the diagnosis comes back, the biopsy comes back as being cancerous, it's only then that, usually, the oncologist will get involved.

Jack Brodie:

All right. That's really interesting to hear. I think, with a lot of these things, and especially in, sort of, exceptional circumstances like a cancer diagnosis, you do wonder what the experience is like for other people. So, it's interesting to hear that.

Obviously, with the case of your brother, he went through a similar scenario. Obviously, the operation that he went through is very different to mine, but going through the GP and having to have that persistence to go back. And obviously, I think, I've had a lot of time to think of it and it's never a thing against GPs. I think it's just as Wendy says. It's we're, perhaps, not equipped in Scotland, where we are, to look for these things.

There's lots of things that we do look out for each year. We look out for the flu, and people go and get their jabs and things like that. But skin cancer isn't always top of the list. But as you mentioned to me, Wendy, it's obviously very common, and especially in young people. So, it's something that we all have to be a little bit more aware of and look out for.

Dr Wendy McInally:

Indeed. And stop going on these tanning beds and things. I think there should be a ban for these tanning studios and things. Yes, it does say that the legal age to be going in [AUDIO CUT-OUT]. But actually, I don't know if that's true because you see younger people going in. Anyway, we're getting off our questions.

So, the next question I've got for you here is, what information and support did you and your family receive during this time? Obviously, this is very important, Jack, because we all need support. But what support was there for you and your family?

Jack Brodie:

Yeah, it's a great question, Wendy, because it's one of those things that you, perhaps, don't think about immediately. When I obviously heard that it was skin cancer, I immediately started to think about, well, what's the treatment and what's going to happen here? But, well, I quite quickly found-- and I was very lucky, at the time, to have an amazing sort of network around me, with my family and some really good friends that helped me throughout at that time.

But what happened, quite quickly, was there were certain people on an emotional side and on a mental side that really stepped up. And the first name that always comes to my mind is the clinical nurse specialist, Sheena Dryden, who was there when I was diagnosed. And she was always there, from day one to even now, six years later, to pick up any questions that I had.

Obviously, I was thrown into a little bit of a roller coaster. that I didn't ask to go on. So, in those instances, you do have a lot of questions and not all of them are rational. A lot of it's just, why me? Why now? This isn't what I'm supposed to be going through.

But she was always there. I don't think that was necessarily her remit. Her job was to know everything about skin cancer and to give suggestions on care, and treatment, and that sort of thing. But the emotional support was a massive one, and that extended beyond myself, Wendy. That wasn't just something that was given to me.

Sheena was there, as well, for my mum, who was in desperate need, at the time, as a lot of parents would be, for someone to talk to and someone to just answer those questions, similar questions to my own. Why now? Why my son? But Sheena was always there to answer them. She didn't always have the answer, but she would always make us feel listened to and heard and would always try and give advice on where we could go to speak to. There was other things along those lines.

I ended up going to the Maggie's Centre, which was based in Edinburgh. And again, that was more therapeutic. It was going in maybe once every two weeks, once a week, whenever I needed to just talk. And sometimes we'd talk about cancer. Other times we would talk about the fact that I was stressed about school because at that time, I was still going through Highers. And I still, very much, had that in the focus of, like, I need to come out the other side and try and get on with my life. So, there were people there to really help.

But I think, as I've maybe alluded to a little bit there, the support didn't stop with just me. And that's one thing that I think is so important. I think, as a young person dealing with cancer, of course, I was worried about the cancer that was inside me. But I was always worried about the things that were outside of my control and the thoughts of my family.

I had a younger sister who I was so desperately worried about, about I can't control the way that she's thinking about this. So, it was so good that there was people like Sheena to talk to and not just for me, for them to talk to, if they wanted to. So, in terms of support, there was support there I think we could always do more, but I'm so grateful for the support that I was offered and managed to get in the end.

Dr Wendy McInally:

Yes, that's good to hear.