



AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER WITH OVARIAN CANCER

WESTERN AUSTRALIAN SINGER NAT RIPEPI UNDERWENT EXTENSIVE SURGERY IN AUGUST 2011, TO ADDRESS THE EXTREMELY RARE OCCURRENCE WHERE ENDOMETRIOSIS DEVELOPS INTO OVARIAN CLEAR CELL CANCER.

Nat Ripepi had a long history of endometriosis. Over the past ten years, she had undergone surgery to remove endometriotic tissue, complemented by hormonal therapies, to suppress tissue growth.

Her endometriosis was being monitored, and her career was going well. Her latest album 'Piece by Piece' had been selling regularly and she was performing regularly in Perth, with a gig at Ellington's scheduled for August.

Towards the end of 2010, Nat began experiencing more pain. While ultrasound results showed a mass on the left ovary, doctors considered it typical of endometriotic growth, and did not suspect anything more serious.

In August 2011, Nat went to the Emergency Department at King Edward Memorial Hospital with severe abdominal pain and fluid retention. Further diagnosis revealed that she had clear cell cancer, which had spread to multiple areas in her abdomen.

While approximately 11 per cent of women suffer from some level of endometriosis, it is extremely rare for the condition to become cancerous. Less than one per cent of endometriosis cases turn into a cancer.

Nat is one of those rare and unlucky cases. Because her cancer had spread to several internal organs, extensive surgery was required to remove it from the bowel, uterus, ovary, liver, peritoneum and diaphragm to achieve optimal debulking.

Nat underwent surgery at Hollywood in August. Gynaecological oncologist Dr Jason Tan says that Nat's great advantage is her age. At 37 years of age, her body is better able to cope with and recover from such extensive surgery.

"In patients who are elderly or with multiple other medical problems, it becomes a difficult clinical decision whether to embark on such surgery," said Dr Tan. "But an otherwise healthy patient can survive more aggressive surgery leading to optimal debulking, which improves response to chemotherapy."

Nat started chemotherapy in mid-September as part of her treatment. The chemotherapy agent was administered through an intraperitoneal point, where the therapy is delivered more directly to where any microscopic residual disease might be located.

"The diagnosis has been very, very unexpected," said Nat. "Especially since endometriosis becoming ovarian cancer is so rare, and doctors were sure that I had nothing to worry about."

"Because it is so unusual, I think it's important for women not to rule this out, if they do have endometriosis."

A full-time musician, Nat hopes to get back to singing as soon as possible.

"Gigging is my only source of income, so it's important that I get back to it from a financial point of view," she said. "But I'd also like to do a benefit concert that raises money and awareness about ovarian cancer."

Nat has been nominated for several Western Australian Music Industry (WAMI) Awards, including most popular acoustic act and most popular female vocalist. She has received two nominations in the WAMI Song of the Year Awards for her songs 'Stronger' and 'I Will Not Fall' and was a finalist in the Dandenong Ranges Folk Festival Songsmith Award in Victoria.

She has been a supporting act for Pat Benatar, The Bangles, The Waifs, Ben Folds, Kate Ceberano and James Morrison.

"BECAUSE IT IS SO UNUSUAL, I THINK IT'S IMPORTANT FOR WOMEN NOT TO RULE THIS OUT, IF THEY DO HAVE ENDOMETRIOSIS."

Opposite page
Dr Jason Tan with
Nat Ripepi

This page
Nat Ripepi
www.natripepi.com



Photo by Rob Watson