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# Celebrating my 70th, thanks to cancer trial



**Having fought cancer by taking part in a trial, Ovens farmer Alex Hosford celebrates his 70th birthday today, writes Liz O'Brien**

**P**OSITIVITY played a huge role in helping Ovens man Alex Hosford overcome a cancer diagnosis.

The farmer and his wife Eleanor — the self-professed worrier in their relationship — also used humour to get them through the hard times.

Alex was diagnosed with multiple myeloma in August 2015 and because he was signed up to a clinical trial, part of his treatment — which included a nurse giving him a chemotherapy injection — could be administered in the comfort of his own home.

"You know that saying in farming, 'Come in for your tea!'" Eleanor said. "Well, I used say, 'Come in for your chemo!'"

"The nurse used to come out to the house and she came early one day and Alex was out in the yard, so instead of shouting, 'Come in for your tea', I went down the yard and shouted, 'Come in for your chemo!' That's just one funny little thing," said Eleanor.

Alex's cancer diagnosis came as a huge shock to himself, his wife and their four children — Nigel, Mark, Philip and Sandie.

Alex, a tillage and cattle farmer, has always led an active lifestyle; he was rarely sick and he had never been admitted to hospital.

But in August, 2015, that changed.

He was admitted to Cork University Hospital where doctors discovered that he had a severe case of septicaemia.

"I was very sick at that stage, the septicaemia had gone into my bones in my shoulder," Alex said.

He was put on a series of antibiotics and a drip four times a day. But while recovering from the infection, tests revealed that Alex also had multiple myeloma, a cancer of the plasma

cells in the bone marrow.

The cancer meant Alex's body didn't have any resistance, increasing the severity of his septicaemia.

"I had never been in hospital before, septicaemia was bad enough but then in a few days to be told you had multiple myeloma was a big shock," he said.

"I'd never had anything too serious before and this certainly was a bit of a blow — you don't know what's around any corner."

Alex and his family knew nothing about multiple myeloma. They were in turmoil.

"The hardship it causes the family; you have to face that — it's not a guilt, but you are the cause of it, and you know that you have to get as well as you can, and as soon as you can," said Alex.

"There's a fair amount of coping with it, but you just have to knuckle down — that's where you are, there's no point in getting upset; you have to knuckle down, look at your options, talk to your doctor and family, decide on a mode of action and get on with it."

As well as having a team of doctors on side, Alex and Eleanor said their family became a team that rallied around them.

"You do everything you can when they're growing up to make sure they are OK and when the chips are down and the tides turned they looked after us," Eleanor said.

Their daughter Sandie, a physio, "became a nurse", their son Mark, who had taken over the farm, helped "in many practical ways, he'd bring in firewood and take the bins to the road, that sort of thing," Eleanor said.

"Nigel lives in France, but he was with us every step of the way, he came home on his own without his family, he's like his dad, he'd cheer up anybody!"



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“And our other son Philip would be the man with the clipboard asking all the questions, you’re in state of shock so you need someone who would ask all the right questions.”

Within a day or two of his diagnosis, Alex was in Professor Mary Cahill’s care at CUH, and she told Alex about the possibility of taking

part in a trial once he was clear from infection.

“I jumped at the chance — for two reasons, you’re going to get better attention and better looked after, there’s a team of nurses looking after you and you’re highly monitored — more so than your average patient.

“You do have to do extra tests and keep a diary but they are minor things. It’s the latest technology and there are people at end of a phone, morning, noon and night, if you have a problem. And any trial is for the betterment for people down the road hopefully. We sort of looked to the future and technology and had no hesitation going on to a trials program.”

Alex was treated at home — Eleanor said that overnight she “became a nurse” and their bedroom resembled a hospital ward.

Alex was put on a treatment of two different drugs and a chemotherapy injection — which he had from home, instead of the hospital.

His treatment went well and he was ready for the next step, chemotherapy to prepare his body for a stem cell harvest, followed by a stem cell transplant in early March, 2016.

“The biggest shock for me was the team told him he’d have to have a transplant — I thought, ‘A transplant for what?’” Eleanor said.

“We knew nothing about stem cell transplant, it all happened so suddenly.”

Alex suffered neuropathy (nerve damage) as a result of the stem cell transplant, and for a time he was unable to walk.

After the transplant he spent three weeks in CUH in isolation, before being able to go home. While neuropathy is something Alex will have to live with for the rest of his life, he has regained strength in his legs and is able to walk again.

Since the end of March, 2016, Alex has been recovering at a steady pace, he credits his

recovery to his wonderful medical team at the CUH, his wife and family and friends.

Today, June 27, Alex turns 70 and there’s a big ‘surprise’ in store for him.

“I’m told there’s a party, but I’m not meant to know about it!”

His children and a few close friends will be there as will his 10 grandchildren who are organising a ‘little concert for their grandad’, with the help of their granny Eleanor.

Alex has no doubt that the cancer trial he took part in helped prolong his life.

While he’s careful of his health and avoids certain situations as a precaution, his life is relatively back to normal. He’s driving again, walking, and gardening, and he’s back on what

Eleanor calls his ‘boy toy’, the ride-on lawnmower.

“He’s always pretending the grass needs to be cut!” she said.

The Ovens man is on a low-level maintenance program and bone strengthener which, all going well, he’ll be finished with next year.

He is now an advocate for the work of Cancer Trials Ireland, which recently rolled out its ‘Just Ask’ campaign, to encourage people living with cancer to ask their consultant oncologist if there is a cancer trial they can join to enhance their treatment options.

Significant strides have been made in cancer treatment because of clinical trials and because of people, like Alex, willing to participate in them.

For more information go to [www.cancer-trials.ie](http://www.cancer-trials.ie)

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## Tomorrow in Life: Couple breathe new life into barracks and provide artistic haven



**LOOKING FORWARD:** Alex and Eleanor toasting their future together.



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BY HIS SIDE: Alex and Eleanor, centre, with their children, left to right, Nigel, Sandie, Mark and Philip, who were all a great support to the couple, as their dad battled cancer.



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**SUPPORTING DAD:** When Alex (centre, front) was hospitalised with septicaemia, it was subsequently discovered that he had multiple myeloma, a cancer of the plasma cells in the bone marrow. His family rallied around him, including, pictured left to right (back row): sons Nigel, Mark and Philip and front: his daughter Sandie and wife and Eleanor.



**HOPEFUL:** Alex and Eleanor. He is now an advocate for the work of Cancer Trials Ireland.