

'Lucky is a strange word to use with **cancer**, but I have been'

When Loreto Gregory was diagnosed with secondary breast cancer, she felt she had nothing to lose by joining a clinical trial. She firmly believes others should too, she tells **Áilín Quinlan**

LUCKY is a strange word to associate with cancer, acknowledges Loreto Gregory, but she has good reason to do it.

After being first diagnosed with breast cancer, and some years later with secondary breast cancer — it appeared in her bones and liver — she was lucky, she says now, that her consultant mentioned a clinical trial that might benefit her.

She was also lucky that the trial happened to be open for potential candidates at the same time that she was ready to participate and lucky again, that, following tests, she was deemed suitable to participate.

That was four years ago, and the retired civil servant says now that if she hadn't been accepted onto the SNAP trial (Schedules of Nab-Paclitaxel in Metastatic Breast Cancer) she's not sure she'd be here today.

Loreto's journey began in June 2007, when the Drogheda, Co Louth, resident was diagnosed with breast cancer. She had a mastectomy on her right breast, and underwent chemotherapy, radiotherapy, and a course of hormone therapy that lasted for several years.

Everything seemed to go well until about October/November 2013 when Loreto noticed a pain in her ribs. She saw her GP about it.

"I had an X-ray which showed that nothing was broken," recalls Gregory (50) but at the time she was due for one of her regular check-ups with her oncologist. During that consultation, she mentioned the pain in her ribs. Tests were carried out over the following weeks.

In January 2014, the hammer-blow came: "I was told that the cancer had come back — it was secondary breast cancer and it was in my liver and bones.

"That was a shock. I've always been optimistic so it was a blow to get this news," recalls Loreto who recalls, that at this stage the pain in her ribs was no more than "a niggle — that was all. It was very silent."

At that same meeting in January, during which her consultant advised her about the different treatments that were available to her, he mentioned the trial, which was running in Beaumont hospital in Dublin:

"I would basically be required to attend three Wednesdays out of four to have the drug delivered intravenously. Every fourth Wednesday I'd be off, and every 12 weeks I'd have a CT scan," Loreto recalls.

Essentially, she was told, the trial was investigating a chemotherapy drug which had been used for other cancers:

"It was hoped it could be used for secondary breast cancer which is what I had."

For Loreto and her husband Michael — who had accompanied her to the consultation — it was a no-brainer. They immediately decided to give the trial a chance.

"To be honest," she recalls, "it didn't seem



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like I had anything to lose, and the other treatments would still be there if this didn't work."

Loreto joined the SNAP trial in February 2014, after undergoing a series of tests to ensure that she was a suitable candidate to use the drug.

Four years later she's still on the trial and still taking the drug — and all appears to be going well.

"I don't feel sick with it, it doesn't leave me ill the way other drugs do," she says, adding that after her visit to hospital, she simply rests — then continues with her day as normal.

"There has been no progression of the cancer. In the first month I was on the drug, the tumour in my liver decreased in size. The

treatment has basically brought the progression of the cancer to a stop. I feel great. I've never been sick with the drug," she says, adding that the only downside is that she has lost her hair, eyelashes and eyebrows

"Now I wear glasses — they cover a multitude," she quips, adding that her nails have become brittle.

But all in all, she believes, it's been "a good swap". She says: "The alternative would be unthinkable. I'll be staying on this drug as long as it works."

"I'm very lucky that my consultant told me about it, that he mentioned it. It was lucky that the trial was open for potential candidates at the same time I was ready to participate and also that I was suitable for the trial," she says.

Loreto is a strong advocate for the participation of oncology patients in clinical trials. Only about 3pc of cancer patients in Ireland participate in trials, compared to the international best practice of 10pc.

"Cancer patients should definitely consider it. You'll hopefully get something out of it."

After all, she points out, the drugs that are successful at the moment were once in clinical trials with participants like her.

"People are a bit nervous of clinical trials; they can have a particular idea of what they might be. I was surprised when I heard there were so few people on trials but in the last few years there's been more awareness about trials and their potential benefits."

"Cancer is part of my life. My life has changed a bit, but cancer has not taken over my life because I'm able to go out and enjoy things and do what I always used to do — and that's thanks to this clinical trial."

I look back now at that awful day in January 2014 when I heard about the diagnosis of secondary breast cancer, but I know it was also a great day because it ended with me going forward for this clinical trial, which has allowed me to continue to enjoy life."