



Second Chances – Silver Linings & Their Clouds.

As treatments have changed and improved over the years for HIV and Hepatitis C, generally people with haemophilia can now look forward to a brighter and healthier future. As a group this is a future that everyone has been looking for, however, as an individual this can cause a wide range of thoughts and emotions, some even unexpected. The following article is a thought provoking view of one individual's view on the changing tide of HIV and Hepatitis C care over the last 20 years and the change in his own perceptions over that time.

Being under the impression that one is living with a death sentence has a remarkable impact on one's thought process and approach to life. It instantly pervades all aspects of one's existence and changes everything utterly, often irrevocably. This is even more pronounced at a young age as the dreams, hopes and expectations of one's peers suddenly no longer apply. The unfairness and randomness of it are as damaging as the physical and emotional consequences. This news is often sudden and shocking; the ramifications are long-term and far-reaching.

The discovery that one then might actually have a future is mind-blowing and almost more difficult to come to terms with. The challenge is as much to do with the timing of the information, which is never merely announced but more of a slow realisation, as it is to do with the literal about turn. This gradual absorbing of said knowledge leads to a lack, and, therefore, fear, of certainty. And of course, one's approach to life has to then undergo yet another complete re-adjustment, often a more difficult one. Why is this seemingly good news more difficult? This is only my opinion and I caution against it being read as a typical experience, but the reasons may be as follows:

Health:

The feeling that one doesn't have long to live removes the need to manage one's long term health with any great care. Now, it would be foolish to imagine many men in their twenties taking great care of their health or living monastically in any way. But everything from diet and cholesterol to dental care and exercise can be ignored. I mean, why get fillings, refuse that slice of cake or not order another take-away or go to the gym if there aren't that many years left in the tank anyway. More alarmingly, why not test out a few drugs or drink heavily in order to dull the pain of one's gloom? These decisions do nothing to better one's longevity but what harm? I'm dying anyway. Then, when it emerges that the individual in question has to deal with actually living for a lot longer, damage has been caused to the heart, liver, teeth, joints etc etc.

Career:

While others are investing in their futures, maybe putting in the hours to impress the boss, climb the greasy pole of promotion, gain experience and develop a contacts book, it's less likely to be the route adopted by one running out of time. Expertise in a chosen field isn't the priority – what is important is enjoying what time one has left. So when the eventual good news comes into focus, the person is at an automatic disadvantage compared to his or her peers (and competitors).

Relationships:

Committing to a relationship is extremely difficult when one sees no future. What's the point in building trust, confidence and the skills that come with these shared experiences when there's no pay off in the form of marriage, kids or growing old together? It's also not unreasonable to question how attractive such a vista might be to a prospective partner. The self-actualisation and subsequent confidence which can come from relationships, love and tenderness are not on the menu at all. Coming to terms with the notion of then actually facing decades, possibly alone, is brutal. Add the appalling and daunting variable of carrying an infectious and potentially fatal virus and relationships are no more than a pipe dream.

Money:

Why save? Who wants to be the richest man in the cemetery? Nest-egg? Mortgage? Pension? Why would one need a bloody pension? It's all about the retail therapy. Fill the hole with possessions, clothes, CDs and books; go on holiday; see the world; be the most generous guy in the bar (there might be some love in that) but whatever, spend, spend, spend. And the shrinking bank balance comes into sharp relief at about the same time as the newly likely future does. This of course, is not helped by the years of neglected career. The fear of an early death is readily replaced with the fear of an uncertain and maybe less comfortable future.

Friends and family:

The people who suffer most from the anger, resentment, mood swings, complaints and general lack of hope are usually those closest, particularly if they're aware of the circumstances and are content to indulge lest they aggravate an already horrific situation. "Let him be, he has enough to deal with". Boundaries are blurred, rules are broken and tongues are held. The dynamics in these relationships alter beyond recognition and are not easy to reassemble.

All of this is general and written in broad brush strokes. For many, the sheer gratitude of a second bite of the apple would far outweigh the difficulties in coming to terms with the upheaval. Yet, some others feel cheated. And not once, but twice.