

## 'DON'S DIARY'

or

to Tijuana and back - for some SHOPPING!

### Day 1

My apologies for the delay in getting started to my diary started as I promised to Exit members and anyone else who is interested in this vital and defining subject.

Mind you, it's really all your fault, as since my wife and I returned from our successful mission to Tijuana, Mexico, so many people – (members and many others) sending me e-mails and even letters and telephone calls, which I've been snowed under.

I'm trying to answer all and every one, in order of their arrival and I think that I can just detect a slowing down. Phew!!!!

For all those who have no idea what this is all about I'd better start at the beginning.

I must also apologise to those who have already 'been through it' and know most if not all about the various cancers and other one-way diseases. However, after discussions it was decided to try and cover as much ground as possible – so this diary also attempts to give those who have not encountered these diseases an idea of what it was like for me – always pointing out that as with most medical conditions, differences occur from one person to another.

I am aged 78 and live in Warragul, a very pleasant and rapidly expanding country town, some 100ks, south-west of Melbourne and in prime dairying country.

Much to my surprise – and I suppose that everyone suffering the same fate is equally surprised – I awoke one morning feeling as though someone (although my wife strongly denied it) had hit me fairly hard on the chest and left some painful bruising. As no visible evidence of this cowardly attack could be seen I went off to see our local G.P. – in whom we are extremely lucky and blessed. Highly qualified and very efficient.

After a superficial examination I was sent off for an X-ray. Late that same afternoon our doctor phoned and told me that I should drop in to collect the necessary form to take to our nearest CAT-scan at the local hospital.

As I've said, I'm now 78 and over the years have had my fair share of trips and visits to hospitals, examinations, tests and operations. After a

while you get to learn not only the esoteric terminology but the order and consequences of those tests. Oh, well I reasoned, a mark must be showing in the appropriate place on my chest.

Next morning it was back to the radiology unit again and this time for a CAT- guided chest biopsy. It was at this point that the subdued tinkling of bells began to make themselves heard – in my head at any rate. Biopsies are used to check on such diseases as cancer and some of its varieties, one of them being mesothelioma. ‘Oh, ho’, I said to myself. (I talk to myself quite a lot and every now and then get a sensible answer). This time, unfortunately, my question about  $2 + 2 =$  produced the correct answer. It was mesothelioma and I had it. Moreover, nothing that I had heard or read about that particular type of cancer was good. In fact it was one of those diseases that no-one survives.

With that happy prospect in mind I thought I’d go home and read some nice cheerful book, such as ‘War and Peace’ or ‘The Brothers Karamazov’! Well, no matter how you feel about it, mediaeval history and that period was fascinating and greatly entertaining. In fact it was probably about as absorbing as a number of today’s Hollywood block-busters.

Strangely enough, having my own diagnosis confirmed gave me just a tiny bit of comfort. “There, wasn’t I clever? I’d been right!”

But then the full import sunk in a little and I found myself lying awake thinking of very many different things. (And one of them was where I was going to hide the books I’d borrowed!) But perhaps the strangest thought of them all was that I found myself thinking, worrying about the essential and non-essential things connected with dying. What surprised me most I found, was that the actual dying itself didn’t worry me at all! (Will it, I wonder, as the time grows inexorably closer?) So what it boiled down to in reality was ‘Apprehension’ about something not expected and not previously experienced.

Yes. ‘Apprehension’ - about something that had yet to happen. And ‘Worry’ about the act of dying – otherwise none at all.

So I counted my blessings, added in a few mobs of sheep, deducted the not-so-good bits and the balance sheet still came out convincingly on the ‘plus’ side. I’d had an interesting and varied life; generally very happy; wonderful wife; a very happy marriage; two great children and four grandchildren.

And as circumstances had turned out, all in all, quite a lot of travel was involved.

I had begun my travelling at the expense of his Royal Britannic Majesty, having joined his Royal Marines at an early age (fourteen) and after being learning to play the Euphonium and Cello, embarked (with a few other bandsmen) aboard a light cruiser (HMS Euryalus) in order to head for the Mediterranean to join the 4<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron. I should point

out that it being so soon after the war, most of that valiant fleet that had helped to win the war was, (rather like my first car – clapped out from over-use.) (I must digress about that car. Why is it that men always have such a blind affection for their first vehicle? Motor-cycle or four-wheels, it doesn't matter. It seems as though it is a positive requirement, already programmed and just waiting for that right time to have been built in, to awaiting the right moment to hatch.

'Bessie' we heard she had been christened 'Bessie' so we carried on with that name.

Anyway, the government of the day was anxious to show at least those nations that then surrounded 'The Med' that Britain still had a formidable navy, fully equipped, well armed and only waiting for the familiar old klaxon horn. As it turned out later, we discovered that half the stores were missing!

It was all a complete waste of time, of course – every time Britain sent one of its old ones off to the scrapyards, the mighty U.S of A launched something smothered in guns that was ten times bigger, better, faster and more effective than anything that the British navy had left that still floated.

Enough, enough I hear you cry! But let me have just a few more to add in another word for verisimilitude. That's the way it was then and that is how I began my travelling!

Later I'll get around to the more interesting part where, having acquired a wife who was also interested in history – especially in and around the mediaeval time-slot we spent a lot of time travelling around, mostly Europe.

Now where was I when I went off the original rail tracks? Oh yes, Dying! But I think I'll leave that subject for a while.

If you remember we left off on that most fascinating of subjects, Dying. Or rather, preparing to do so and how I felt about it.

O.K. so the living part would be coming to an end – but not today and probably not tomorrow either. In fact, judging from the oncologist's report, the actual time for my departure could still be quite a long way ahead. I'd had it explained to me once that there was a parallel between mesothelioma and a currently dormant volcano. Well, this particular, personal volcano had been just been sitting there quietly, minding its own business – but bit by bit – growing. Nothing very unusual happened to my particular volcano. Everything seemed quite normal, but the usual medical reaction is to start treatment as soon as possible. The 'wise men' put their heads together, studied all the rapidly accumulating films and came to a decision. There were three viable choices, applied according to the most suitable for the stage and position of the base tumour.

People are funny – is a well-known – truism. And just as well because were we all thinking the same things in the same way with similar minds, medicine would be nothing short of chaotic.

Chemotherapy; was not likely to be successful;

Surgery was also a no-go option. It seemed that yet another method would have to be utilised –

Radio-Therapy. (And of the three, R-T was the one that I would have chosen.)

Next it was a visit to an oncology treatment facility, fortunately located close to our best friends. By co-incidence two of our closest friends lived only a ten-minute drive away from the clinic.

The oncology clinic itself was a very highly rated, purpose-made unit that ran like clockwork, plus the accuracy of the prime atomic timekeeper. (And judging from the recent performance of the Melbourne transport network, just a tad better in that department!)

More films, scans etc., and I was then measured up for my treatment. And as with everything else connected with the unit, they certainly didn't waste any time about it. Using the measurements from the films, together with a complicated software computer programme uniquely programmed for my tumour - all my treatments were aimed exactly where they needed to go. The fictional Robin Hood himself couldn't have been more accurate! I was then told that my treatment was to be spread over 6 weeks - or 30 sessions. These generally comprised of one short session (20 sec. from the top and 20 from below) each week-day. Quite rapidly, I began to get quite sunburned – in just the two places.

Having our very good friends living so closely nearby we were able to drive home after my Friday treatments and drive back again after breakfasts on Mondays, in time for a Monday afternoon session.

So far everything and everybody connected with the clinic seemed to have been co-ordinated most thoughtfully – and all the staff seemed happy to be working there and together.

## DAY 4

There was only one thing that had me thoroughly confused (O.K. I'll even admit to more confused) and that was trying to sort out their accounting system! The r/therapy unit guarantees that no one is refused treatment because of funding problems – and they are quite correct. But when you are having daily treatment and Medicare only send out their accounts at intervals, things become more than a little confusing. I tried to keep pace with it for a while but when one of the nice girls suggested that I just paid the difference, I leapt at the idea. (And that's another exaggeration. The way I was feeling by then I had trouble leaping over a

single sheet of paper.) But thereafter the accounting suddenly became much easier – if not clearer!

It had been clearly explained to me that the treatment was repetitive and distinctly boring. I had also been told that the one predominating symptom would be tiredness and lassitude. And they were certainly right. Every time I sat down, my eyes closed with sleep following closely. Naturally, having slept most of the day I wouldn't be able to sleep at night. 'There! that made sense didn't it? It made some sense, logical sense or even sensible logic - but it didn't work out that way at all. There I was snoring away, whilst all about me the household was a hive of activity.

Fortunately, they told me that driving the car was not a problem and it wasn't.

The treatment scheduling was kept as regular as possible which meant that when you walked into the waiting room, well-known faces smiled and greeted you.

Only very occasionally (twice in 30 treatments) did anything go amiss. The very heavily lead-insulated safety door became inoperative and as the staff are involved with x-rays each and every day, they have to take every precaution.

At last my course of treatment came to an end and that was that. I gathered that the strength of the r/t treatment had been as strong and safe a dose as it was possible to give.

Then I received my medical marching orders – still as repetitive as ever, packed our car, thanked our friends and headed homewards. It was great to be heading towards home again.

An examination by our GP and later the hospital's resident specialist all confirmed that I was to continue with the most modern medicine available. Apart from the drugs it was – surprise, surprise - Rest, more rest and yet more rest. Don't do too much. And rest!

Not an easy regime to undertake. It practically took care of itself. "What's up?"

"You are, it's breakfast time",

"but I don't feel hungry?"

"Breakfast"

"Snore"

Goodness, I was fair worn out by this merciless daily grind.

Whilst it was great to be home again, my poor wife was having to do all the fetching and carrying and every now and then could be heard to mutter "Breakfast," or "Dinner" or something that required my eyes to remain open for a few horrible minutes. Our loveable Burmese cat also

seemed to be practising for a feline physiotherapy exam, only his training consisted solely of settling himself somewhere about my person and going to sleep!

If there was any improvement it must have passed me in disguise and soon I began to feel quite ill. My gastric parts began to play up and in a big way.

“Try to eat something”.

“I’ll try.” Down it went . Whoops, back it came. And when it did stay down for a little rest – it would again return – but this time by a different route. It was very unpleasant, smelly and extremely messy. It is also a disgusting experience and I became more and more feeble. Our ever efficient GP was constantly varying and changing my medicines and sometimes they partially worked and sometimes they really worked! And I became even more feeble. One day I had an appointment for another blood test but when the time came to get out of bed and drive to the hospital – I found that despite their plans for more ex-sanguinetting, there was just no way that I could do so. I felt utterly helpless. No inclination to move and absolutely no energy to stimulate worries. Iris phoned the Pathology Lab. Trish phoned someone else and within minutes an ambulance arrived to take me to the hospital.

Firstly to the Emergency Ward where all the usual basic tests were carried out E.C.G.; more blood (I must have been by that time). In exchange the dubious swap of my blood for another litre of saline liquid.

Slowly, very slowly I began to feel a little better. Meals continued to arrive on my bedside table but I still didn’t feel like eating. I became an expert at rearranging whatever was on my plate - to make it look as though I had been tucking in with a healthy appetite. O.K., with a reasonably light appetite. Well perhaps I didn’t fool anyone at all, but I continued where I’d left off.

So as the gap between pretending to eat a hearty breakfast and actually doing so narrowed, things began to look and feel a little better. Whilst never having had any pretensions of being a ‘Hollywood’ film star type I quickly reached the stage where my epidermis looked terrible. Layers of flesh sagged from here and there. I couldn’t even bear to look at myself, it was painful to look at.

One morning I staggered into the doctor’s surgery on my two sticks – one on its own was just not enough. Everyone looked at me in dismay whilst I looked back at them with an equal quantity of the same dismay they had been displaying.

Things did improve I’m glad to say . . . More later!