

A YEAR FROM HELL



When you've been hideously ill for a year, undergoing chemotherapy and radiotherapy, facing the prospect of having your tongue cut out and your teeth removed, it's hard to imagine life will ever be as good as it once was. But for Roy James and his wife Pauline, in some ways, life actually got better.

Words Irena Brooks
Photos Roger Richardson

Roy was 49 when he first noticed that something wasn't right. He and Pauline were returning from her aunt's funeral in Levin during June 2010, when Roy commented to her on the trip home, that he felt terrible.

"My mouth felt horrible and overall I felt really bad," Roy recalls. "We had been out for a meal in Palmerston North the night before and we were trying to figure out what he could have eaten to make him feel so bad," says Pauline.

When they got home, he went to the dentist because he thought he must have had a tooth problem. The dentist couldn't see anything wrong, so he sent Roy to his GP. He couldn't see anything wrong either.

"Everyone said you were fine, but you were out of sorts and you were grumpy," says Pauline.

For Roy's 50th birthday in August that year, Pauline bought a trip for the pair of them, to Vanuatu.

Roy felt sick the entire time and said to Pauline "something's not right".

"We came home, went to the doctor again two or three times, nothing," Pauline continues. "Went to the ear, nose and throat specialist in New Plymouth

just before Christmas and he thought it was acid reflux and told us to come back in January."

"We had the worst Christmas ever," Pauline remembers. "Roy couldn't eat anything.

"We went to the health shop, searched on the internet, to see if we could treat it ourselves. Then he started losing weight – in fact, it just fell off him. When we went back to the specialist in January, he'd lost about 10-15 kilos. He put Roy in hospital, put a camera right down and found buckets of acid."

"They put me on those Losec pills but they didn't change anything," says Roy.

One week, he managed three-quarters of a day at work, and that was all he could do. "I just sat at home with my head in my hands."

"By Easter, he was really bad," Pauline remembers. "He didn't want to eat and he'd lost 20 kilos."

They went to Pukehina Beach in the Bay of Plenty for a break and Roy was so weak, he couldn't throw his surf-casting rod out to sea.

They returned home determined to get some action to find out what was causing Roy's ill health. Their GP put them on to

Campbell White and he ordered another MRI. All tests done until this stage had come back 'normal'.

The results came back and at the beginning of May last year, they were told it was cancer. It was at the base of Roy's tongue. It is a rare cancer but typically affects severe smokers and alcoholics.

Roy's never smoked and he's not a drinker.

"The way they explained it to us was, that it can sit there and make you very unwell, and then it can suddenly just pop up. It was quite sizeable," – Pauline indicates the shape of a large plum.

When Roy was told he had cancer, he says it didn't worry him.

"Right they've found something and they can get on and treat it now," was his response.

"Ironically, when we were coming back from Pukehina at Easter, we ran into Craig Nolly (of Abacus) at a petrol station in Rotorua," says Pauline. "We told him what had been going on and a few days later Craig rang me just checking to see how we were going. I told him we'd just found out it was cancer. He asked what sort of cancer, and I had it written down and read that out to him – I still can't remember what it was – and he said 'leave it with me, I'll be in touch'. He came back within about an hour that day and asked: 'Do you remember your insurance?' and I wasn't thinking about anything then, we were just trying to make it all work. How we were going to get to Palmerston, having his teeth out, we've got a business to run, I've got a job, we've got a farmlet here, how we were going to get it worked out – Roy was just so sick he couldn't do anything.

"Craig said, 'you've got Trauma Insurance – it's going to be OK. It's a claim and I'm sure you're going to be OK'. And I was like 'oh yeah,' you know. I still didn't realize what it was. A few days later we got out the policy and had a look. We just looked at one other and sort of laughed really, 'cause it was a substantial amount and we thought 'nothing good ever happens to us' really. So we just got on with it.

"Then Craig rang back within the week and said they were going to pay out."

The couple then went to Palmerston North to live for 4 months, while Roy had his treatment.

In amongst all this drama, the James' 16-year-old fox terrier, also wasn't well. After Roy's first treatment of chemotherapy, they found out the dog had cancer too.

"The vet said you wouldn't believe how often it happens, that once an owner gets sick, the animal does as well," says Roy.

They had to put their beloved pet down.

"It was pretty rough, right then," recalls Pauline.

But they still had each other, and with their financial concerns taken care of, they could focus on getting Roy well.

The couple agrees that having that insurance payout helped with Roy's recovery.

"Well, a) I could be with him – he listens to me, and b) the peace of mind. There were many people that were down there (in Palmerston North for treatment) that were on their own," says Pauline. "There were four men in Roy's room and I was the only woman there all the time supporting Roy – others had to work, or keep things going at home. We heard some horrendous stories of families who were mortgaging, well, losing their homes really, cos there's nothing, when you've got cancer. You can't go on the dole, there's no ACC, nothing. So you're on your own for the duration. If you've got life assurance they pay it when you die, not when you're alive."

Pauline admits she even felt a bit guilty sometimes, that they didn't have to worry about money.

"It paid for everything it needed to. It arrived – it was one page. All I had to do was write Roy's name and sign it, then give it to Craig. He did the whole thing. He followed up the doctor, did all of that. Then he rang me and said, 'it's going to be in your account'. I don't think the enormity of what it was hit us – we just knew that we were OK. Whatever happened, the mortgage would be paid, the business was taken care of."

"The thing about Craig is, he's honest. What you see is what you get. He's just a really neat guy. We probably wouldn't have bought that insurance if Craig hadn't suggested it."

Neither can remember the premiums they were paying but will never forget

the payment they received and comfort it's given.

"We never thought we'd need it. Everyone thinks it's going to be someone else, it's never going to be us. I don't even think we realized what we had until we needed it."

In all, Roy lost 26 kilos. He's gained a bit back since, has retained a full head of hair, he's even got his whiskers growing back. He kept his tongue, had eight molars removed and retained some saliva in his mouth, so he can eat. Some people can never eat normally again after the treatment he has been through.

It took a year to recover, and this past year the couple went on a 3 month holiday overseas – taking in all the tourist sights.

"We'd never been past Australia before," Pauline says. "I left work. Roy decided he wanted to stay with the business, but it was because he enjoyed it, not because he had to."

They have also bought a mobile home and have done a few trips around NZ.

Pauline realizes now she devoted too much of her time and energy to her work and the community. She is now studying to be a primary school teacher, and concentrating on getting good food into Roy.

"We have some interesting times with food – he can't eat a lot of stuff. We eat a lot of veges now – we look at more homegrown stuff, natural, don't do takeaways, he can't eat meat."

"I used to be a real sweet tooth – can't have it now, tastes like rubbish," states Roy. But he is gradually improving.

"Just little things. You might go months and months without being able to eat something, then one day, you can. So every now and then, I'll just try something.

"My hearing is a bit weird, and I have no immunity to colds or anything."

These days they like to chill out with family and friends – "we don't sweat the small stuff," says Pauline.

"Roy's always been positive that he was going to beat this. Other people have pretty much got you put in a box straight away," admits Pauline. "That's the thing you notice, the people. People you don't know well, they're at your door and they want to help. And others that were quite close, have gone. They can't cope. You find out who your friends are."



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