

## Cancer in adolescents and young adults – a personal perspective

**Michelle Smith, 28, found out she had a form of leukaemia (acute lymphoblastic leukaemia, or ALL) two weeks after her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Michelle, who lives in The Glebe, works as a medical secretary.**

“I’d been feeling ill for two months with flu-like symptoms, unexplained bruises, and no energy. I didn’t have a regular doctor, and ended up seeing three different doctors. I was prescribed antibiotics, and then it was thought I might have glandular fever. In the end my dad insisted they give me a blood test.

“I’d never been seriously ill before – I’d certainly never been in hospital – and the last thing I expected was a cancer diagnosis. I was an invincible teenager.

“I immediately felt doomed. At eighteen I was ready to start growing up; instead, I thought I was going to die. I thought cancer was something that only happened to old people, and I didn’t know that survival rates for people my age are very good.

“The next thing I thought was ‘oh no, I’m going to lose my hair’. It might sound trivial in the scheme of things, but I was an eighteen-year-old girl and things like that are important at that age.

“I started a year of intensive IV chemotherapy, which made me feel terrible. I was halfway through Year 12, about to have my mid-year exams, but there was no question of me going back to school while I was having the chemo.

“My life was on hold for a year. I couldn’t plan even a night out, because I didn’t know if I’d feel up to it. Before my diagnosis, I was going to parties every week, but I had to completely drop out of the social scene. I just didn’t feel up to it.

“I had a further year and a half of chemo tablets after the first 12 months, but it was less full-on and I could start thinking about getting my life back on track. I tried to go back to school, but I’d had a mild stroke associated with my treatment and this affected my writing. Before my diagnosis I’d planned to do nursing, but that wasn’t looking likely any more.

“Just after I turned 19, I got a job at a doctor’s surgery where I worked for three years, and I’ve been working for respiratory specialist Hugh Mestitz for the past six years. I love my job – I look forward to coming to work each day. I’m planning some further studies in bookkeeping and perhaps in the future taking on more responsibility in the office.

“Another plus from this whole experience is that my family is closer than ever now. My immediate family and close relatives were such a support to me – I don’t know what I would have done without them.

“And I’m making up for lost time with my social life. I’m out all the time – I’m living my youth now! I had a horrible couple of years, but I’m alive and I’m loving life.”