

MARK RADCLIFFE EXCLUSIVE

Pictures: BBC

'It's such a euphoric feeling to think I haven't got cancer any more'

The presenter tells AMY PACKER how tumours on his tongue almost ended his 40-year radio career – and how seeing a doctor quickly saved his life

TO LISTENERS of Mark Radcliffe's Folk Show on BBC Radio 2, his broadcast on October 3, 2018 appeared in no way unusual. So when the veteran presenter took to the mic at the end of the session to announce that he had "some cancerous tongue and lymph node issues" and would be "disappearing for a while", his fans were shocked.

"It seemed a bit grand – who should give a toss really?" says the 60-year-old, who was diagnosed with head and neck cancer last September.

"But because I was going to be gone for months I just thought honesty was the best policy."

Sitting down to his first interview about his cancer journey, Mark is candid about the harrowing experience but has lost none of his trademark wit. "They took a walnut-sized thing from deep down on the back of my tongue and then out of my neck, which was the secondary in the lymph nodes, they took something the size of an apple," he says in his familiar northern burr. "My wife Bella said, 'An apple and a walnut? That's practically a Waldorf salad!'"

Mark was on holiday in Polzeath, Cornwall, with Bella, 50, last July when he first found a lump. "I'd had a beard for a while and thought, 'Oh it's too hipster, everyone has a beard now, I'll go clean shaven. As I took it off I noticed something on my neck. I thought it was probably a swollen lymph gland but when we got home I went to my GP, who sent me for an ultrasound."

"One thing led to another and I found myself seeing a specialist for a biopsy and being told I had a cancerous growth in my neck."

THE diagnosis came as a shock to Mark, who had convinced himself there was nothing to worry about. "I had gone to the appointment alone because I didn't think it was anything important, so I remember them asking, 'Have you got anyone with you?' and thinking, 'Oh bloody hell. Why?'"

"Afterwards, I went and sat by the duck pond at Macclesfield Hospital and thought, 'Well, I've something growing inside me,' but managed to not to catastrophise it, which sometimes I am prone to do."

"But the sun was shining and physically I felt fine, so I didn't really panic."

Following the discovery, Mark needed a full body MRI at The Christie Hospital in Manchester to see whether the cancer had spread.

"I had the scan on the Thursday and didn't get the results until the following Tuesday, so that was quite a long weekend," says the presenter who spent 21 years at BBC Radio 1 before moving to Radio 2 in 2004.

"It's funny how quickly life changes. When they confirmed that it hadn't gone elsewhere in my body we were sort of punching the air thinking, 'Great, I've only got cancer in my neck, this is marvellous!'"

Despite this "good news", Mark's surgeon later told him he was lucky

he saw a doctor so promptly. "He said the cancer would have killed me in months, not years," reveals the father of three who lives in Knutsford, Cheshire.

"I was doing a three-hour radio show every day but hadn't had any discomfort despite having such a large tumour hidden at the back of my tongue."

"The cancer grows gradually so everything bends and shapes around it. I'd been clearing my throat a bit more but had felt fine."

"It's like the film *Alien* – you have something growing inside that could kill you but your body is supporting it. It's a weird thought."

Following surgery, Mark required

an intensive six-week course of radiotherapy and two rounds of chemotherapy. "They say, 'We'll cut you, burn you and then poison you', so it is pretty miserable."

Despite this, Mark was surprised to discover those weeks were not the most difficult. "I finished treatment on December 12 and it was after that I really felt emotionally unstable," he admits.

"It coincided with Christmas being over and January is a cold, dark, miserable time of year anyway, so for me that was the toughest part."

"I dropped into Maggie's Centre

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