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# 'My surgeon said it would have killed me in months, not years'

Pictures: BBC/PA

## FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

at The Christie [which offers emotional support to people with cancer] and when I sat down the counsellor said, 'So how are you doing?' and I just burst into tears, which is unlike me.

"She asked, 'Have you just finished treatment?' and when I said yes she said mine was a familiar scenario. For six weeks you see the same staff every day who tell you treatment is going great. I had a rota of friends who would drive me, so we'd have a chat and a cup of tea.

"You get sort of institutionalised – it's all quite convivial.

"Then suddenly you're at home, feeling useless, not working, waiting three months for your results. I was a husk of a person."

Mark decided the solution was to return to the airwaves. "I started recording the Radio 2 Folk Show again in January because that isn't very strenuous, then I went back live, presenting the Radio 6 Music weekend breakfast show with Stuart Maconie in mid-February.

"I've done so much radio that I never get nervous – I almost feel my heart rate drop when a show starts – but the week before I started back, I began to worry whether I would have the speed of thought to hold up my end of the conversation. Thankfully that feeling vanished within 20 minutes of going live."

**A**N OPERATION so close to the vocal chords might have been quite a worry for someone whose career is based on their voice and Mark reveals he had to sign a waiver before he was operated on.

"There was no guarantee I would come out with the same voice but I didn't have any choice and that's one of the things that helped me stay positive really.

"A lot of the hardest times you have in life are when you are faced with difficult decisions – when you agonise over things, that's really stressful. With this they said, 'This might affect your voice', which isn't great for someone who does what I do for a living but if it's that or dying then it's fine isn't it? It puts everything into perspective.

"My voice has come out fine, mercifully. In my head it sounds slightly deeper but on the radio people think it sounds the same."

As for long-term damage, Mark won't be growing back the beard that concealed his cancer – though not through choice. "The radiotherapy has destroyed a lot of hair follicles so one half of my face doesn't grow stubble. It also



**RIGHT WAVELENGTH:** Surgery didn't affect Mark's voice, allowing him to return to work in January. **Left,** Mark with Ziggy, the dog he got after going into remission. **Above** with wife Bella, who has been his rock



was really hard. It meant I got out of the habit of eating lots but I still have three meals a day and my oncologist isn't worried. And while I wouldn't recommend it as a diet plan, I'm enjoying being thinner.

"I feel really well now, although I can get quite tired."

In mid-March, Mark was finally told his cancer was in remission. "It's a euphoric feeling to think I haven't any of that crap in me any more," he says. "I'm on a six-month check-up, which I think is a good sign. There's no reason to believe I should get it again but if I do, at least we will be on it early."

**H**AVING benefited from seeking help quickly, Mark is supporting North West Cancer Research's head and neck cancer campaign #SpeakOut.

Launching today, it aims to raise awareness among men, who are three times more likely to be diagnosed with the cancer but often ignore early signs. "This means that when they present, their tumours are more advanced, making treatment more difficult and reducing chances of success," explains Professor Terry Jones, director of the North West's Head and Neck Centre.

Symptoms include a persistent sore throat, the feeling of a lump in the throat, mouth ulcers that don't heal after three weeks, a hoarse voice for longer than four weeks, blood in your spit and difficulty swallowing.

Mark adds: "Don't think you're being tough by not getting things checked out, or assume it's something and nothing and not bother going to the doctors. If you are even slightly worried about anything, check it out. Honestly, why wouldn't you?"

● *To find out more about the symptoms of head and neck cancer and support North West Cancer Research's #SpeakOut campaign visit [nwcr.org](http://nwcr.org)*

## HEAD AND NECK CANCERS: THE FACTS

● **Around 12,000 cases of head and neck cancers are diagnosed each year in the UK, causing over 4,000 deaths annually.**

● Over the last decade, head and neck cancer incidence rates have increased by around a quarter in the UK. Men are up to three times more likely to be diagnosed with the disease than women.

● **There are more than 30 areas within the head and neck where cancers can develop, including the mouth and lips, voice box, throat, salivary glands, nose and sinuses and the nasopharynx (area at the back of the nose and mouth). Gullet, thyroid, brain tumours and eye cancer don't tend to be**

classified as a head and neck cancer.

● An estimated nine out of 10 head and neck cancers start in squamous cells lining the mouth, nose and throat.

**Symptoms include (but are not limited to):**

- Difficulty swallowing.
- **A lump in your throat or on your neck.**
- Sore throat or cough for more than three weeks.
- **A red sore or ulcer in your mouth.**
- A change in or hoarseness in your voice.
- **Blood in your spit.**
- Significant weight loss over a short period of time.

● **Treatment depends on the type you have but may include radiotherapy, chemotherapy and surgery to remove tumours.**

● If a cancer in the mouth or throat spreads from where it started, the first place it will usually move to is the lymph nodes in the neck. Lymph nodes are small, bean-shaped structures that are part of the lymphatic system.

The cancer may begin to grow in the lymph nodes and this can show up as a painless lump.

Enlarged lymph nodes are much more likely to be due to an infection than to cancer but if you have a lump on your neck that hasn't gone away within three to four weeks get it checked by a specialist doctor.

destroyed my saliva glands so I have to keep sipping water and at night my mouth dries up totally so I can't speak until I've had a drink.

"My taste has fared better than many people but I used to like reasonably hot Indian food and chillies – now anything spicy is agony so I have to eat quite bland food. But it's a small price to pay."

Another knock-on effect was weight loss. "I couldn't eat for a long time," Mark says. "At first, after the operation, swallowing was agony, so for days I just had protein shakes. But I managed to eat enough that they didn't put a feeding tube in. I'm glad I avoided that – it sounds really unpleasant.

"I remember having tiny bowls of soft stuff like moussaka and shepherd's pie and my wife saying, 'Come on, have another mouthful', but I felt so sick from the chemo. It

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