

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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DOUBLE ACT: Long-time radio collaborators Stuart Maconie and Mark Radcliffe who currently host a weekend show on BBC Radio 6 Music

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

Pictures: BBC/PA

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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."

AN 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

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

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."

HAVING 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*

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