



Teacher with testicular cancer – should I tell my students?

When I was diagnosed with testicular cancer I decided to tell my students (11 to 15 years old) because they will find out anyway as soon as the side effects of chemotherapy will kick in. And I didn't want rumours or speculations spread in the school community.

I met a 12-year-old boy in the cancer clinic who had testicular cancer. **"I decided there and then that I would educate the pupils about cancer when the opportunity arose. I had to brief them and warn them, because all my pupils were around this age. It was the week since I started to lose my hair in bunches, that I said to them in a physics class, "Ok, guys, today we'll turn physics into a hygienics lesson." I knew they loathed the word hygienics. It was exactly the reason why I used it. Promptly one of them said, "But why hygienics? None of us is sick!"**
"Yes, that's what I thought, too," I answered. Then I put my fingers into what was left of my hair, pulled a little and let the handful of hair float to the floor. I know it was a ghoulish start to a lesson, but I immediately had everybody's attention, exactly as planned - none of them was to doze through this lesson. There were boys and girls in my class. I was going to explain testicular cancer and breast cancer to them so that neither the boys nor the girls had reasons to feel embarrassed. I told them everything: how I had noticed that something was wrong, how I had

sperm frozen and about chemotherapy and its side-effects. "You can notice a cancerous growth only if you regularly run your fingers over your testicles and breasts. If you notice something which wasn't there before, go tell your mother or father."

Turning to the boys I said, "All of you play with your nuts, don't you!"

They started to laugh. "Yes, you are laughing because it's true. Do it consciously so that you can notice if anything changes. Should you feel a little lump, go to your parents and tell them that you need to see a doctor, because you once had a teacher who told you about this."

It was good that the students knew. From me creating awareness around cancer and talking about it was often my way to deal with the disease. I had much support from both parents and students. They visited me in hospital and later at home. **"One of the nicest surprises was arranged by my pupils Achim and Ronald. Since visiting hours had already ended they snuck in through the hospital kitchen to bring me a pizza. "Hospital muck can't taste good, they grinned."**

I became severely depressed and decided I have to resign because I couldn't cope with my work and life anymore. I decided to go and travel the world. I did that before and hoped my zest for life will return if I do positive things. What kept me going till the end

of the school year were the students and I quote my book: **"I still dreaded the last day of school. Having to say goodbye to the pupils was really tough. I knew how honest they were. During the past year they had vividly shown me that life can be fun too. I recalled this *joie de vivre* when I felt bad. Children played, sang, skipped along, quarrelled and made up again, and they squealed with pleasure. That was life. I also wanted to do that again. To squeal with pleasure! The pupils had given me so much courage – they had given me the courage to live."**

In 2006 a former student of mine invited me for coffee just to say thank you that I explained it in class and made them aware. "I was aware because you told us."

“You actually saved my life and I'm 16 years old”

I felt the rising water level in my eyes... Just that makes it worth standing up for cancer and sharing my story! ■