

Wrestling a giant

When you've been diagnosed with a terminal disease, the last thing you're thinking about is work. But for David Crewe-Brown, his colleagues at SAB turned out to be just the support network the family needed!

BY TAMARA OBERHOLSTER

David Crewe-Brown, Supply Chain Development Manager at SAB, is an avid mountain biker, father of three and a hardworking, clean-living churchgoer who believes in balance and moderation. When he began suffering from severe back pain two years ago, cancer was the last thing on his mind.

"I was sure it was bad posture or a slipped disc in my spine," says David. "My executive medical didn't pick anything up." Neither did an X-ray, blood test or urine sample. When physio and muscle relaxants didn't help, he went back to his doctor, who discovered a problem with his kidney and referred David to an urologist the next day.

"I was diagnosed with cancer on Tuesday, 19 July 2011. By Saturday, I was in hospital for a seven-and-a-half-hour operation to remove the kidney and as much cancer as the doctors could see."

The week of the diagnosis was traumatic. The doctors thought that David had kidney cancer, which doesn't respond to chemotherapy or radiation. It had also spread to his lungs. The prognosis wasn't good. David wrapped up his work

and prepared himself for the worst, saying goodbye to his wife, Sam, and their children.

THE BATTLE BEGINS

A week later, David received good news: the pathology reports showed he had stage-three testicular cancer, which was treatable with chemotherapy. "I don't think anyone has ever been so grateful to have chemo," says David, "and we considered this a miracle; God's hand of provision for us."

During his three cycles of chemo, over nine weeks, David "had a couple of complications along the way, but in November 2011 it looked like I was clear," he says. "It was such good news. I finally started to get back to normal life. But in January 2012, I woke up one night with the same pain and night sweats. The doctor confirmed that the cancer was back."

This time, it was around David's liver and growing aggressively. Although shattered by the news, David says his faith carried him through the new three-month treatment, which brought its own complications. He



David, his wife Sam and their children, Sarah-Jayne, Benjamin and Neena

TESTICULAR CANCER FACTS

- Testicular cancer generally affects men between the ages of 18 and 39. It is not contagious and can't spread from one person to another. It accounts for approximately 1% of all cancers in men.
- Risk factors for testicular cancer include having had an undescended testicle (usually picked up in the first year of life), abnormal development of the testicle or other organs, and a personal or family history of testicular cancer.
- Testicular cancer is almost always curable if detected and treated early on.
- Men should check their testicles once a month for any changes, such as any swelling, lumps, or changes in size or colour. These should be checked by a doctor, as should any pain or achy areas in the groin.

suffered temporary facial paralysis and, after the chemo, there was still a tumour in his chest which was treated with one final high-dose of chemo which required a stem cell transplant.

"It was quite tricky because I had zero immunity," says David. "I was kept in isolation for three weeks and had to Skype my son for his birthday – my children weren't allowed to visit me. I'm grateful I didn't get sick and, although chemo is hard on your kidneys, my one lasted."

NEVER LOSE HOPE

In October 2012, David had another scan. Although the tumour still showed up, it was smaller than before and the doctors said it might even be scar tissue.

"In January 2013, the tumour was still visible, but it hadn't grown, which means it's not like the aggressive cancer I'd had before; and it's probably dying," David says.

"It's a positive prognosis and I'm hugely relieved. I still have to go for scans every few months over the next 10 years, but it's great to live 'normal' life again!"

SUPPORT IS VITAL

David says support from friends, family, colleagues and SAB played an enormous role in his journey to recovery.

He cites a verse from the Bible, which says, "... suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character; and hope." And another which says: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds."

"It sounds like such a paradox, but when you go through something like this you experience the joy of knowing how people love and care for you and are moved to compassion. I think that's why God allows it," he says. "I realised how short life is when I got a call to say two of my colleagues had »

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died in a car crash. Life is so temporary. We have to live each day to the full."

David notes that SAB was incredibly supportive during his entire journey with cancer. "I'm so thankful for the way the company has continued to back me and provide for me while I was going through this," he says. "It was amazing. They said, 'You just get better.' It meant one less thing to worry about."

NEW MEANING TO "TEAMWORK"

He is especially thankful for the support of his Supply Chain Development team. "At one point, I said to them it means I've done a good job if they can carry on without me," he says. "I'm so grateful to Thinus van Schoor, who was standing in as Supply Chain Director, who was great. I've been working for SAB for 15 years, so there were lots of people throughout the organisation encouraging me."

"Belinda Phillips, the SAB Employee Benefits Manager, and our case manager, Anusha Radhakrishna from Momentum Health, were awesome and deserve huge thanks from us. They called my wife, explained everything and were there throughout the journey to respond to any queries or sort out any problems regarding medical costs and treatment authorisation."

David also found support in a prayer group he is part of with some planning team members at SAB, and from the daily emails

sent out by Merle Venter from the Ibhayi Brewery, which include a thought for the day and a list of prayer needs.

David says it's a joy to share his story with people, on his blog at: www.davidcbgoliath.wordpress.com and in person. His message to others in tough times is to remember that they are not alone in their suffering, and that perseverance through trials develops character.

"There were probably three times where I thought it was the end," he admits. "It's tough at the time, to hold your children and think you won't see them growing old, but when you've come out on the other side, you learn to take each day at a time and to live every day to the full. My journey is not over. I'm just so thankful to God, my wife, friends, family, church and the people here at work for walking through this with me."

For more information about cancer detection, treatment, support and education, visit www.cansa.org.za.



HOW TO SUPPORT SOMEONE WHO IS SICK

EXPRESS YOUR SUPPORT

David says the messages he received from colleagues and friends helped to lift his spirits. A thoughtful email, SMS or phone call will be appreciated.

OFFER SPIRITUAL SUPPORT

Knowing that people were praying for him and his family – even people he didn't know personally – was humbling and touching for David.

BE SPECIFIC

Although you might say, "Call me anytime you need something," and mean it, David notes that it's hard to ask for help because you don't want to burden others. Rather say, "I have Wednesday afternoon free. Can I pick up the kids for you?"

OFFER PRACTICAL HELP

David says the family of the person who's ill needs support too. Meals delivered by friends while he was in hospital meant one less thing for his wife to worry about.