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Media Release

Local GP shares pancreatic cancer experience to urge early detection

During Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month, a Devizes GP is urging others to know and act on the signs of pancreatic cancer, following their own recent diagnosis and treatment at the Royal United Hospitals (RUH) Bath NHS Foundation Trust.

Charles Cowen, 57, describes his pancreatic cancer diagnosis as a 'heart-wrenching moment'. However, this was not the hardest part of his experience – that was the uncertainty leading up to the diagnosis.

"Knowing that there is something that requires all of your attention, that is potentially serious and even life-threatening is better than not knowing at all," he says. "If you're worried about something, it's better to know and to be able to talk it through."

Around 10,000 people are diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in the UK every year, and early detection is vital for the best prognosis possible.

However, symptoms can be subtle. Charles did not experience the typical signs such as tummy or back pain, unexplained weight loss, jaundice, or nausea and vomiting.

Instead, he noticed persistent fatigue and a subtle change in his bowel habits. He was diagnosed with borderline anaemia, and had signs of inflammation in his blood, muscles and joints, and fever. While investigations were carried out, he became pre-diabetic and noticed that he had less tolerance for exercise, and mild cognitive changes.

Working with colleagues and specialists, Charles was persistent in seeking an answer to his non-specific symptoms. Following extensive investigations, a PET-CT scan, followed by a biopsy at the Bristol Royal Infirmary (BRI), confirmed pancreatic cancer in November 2024.

Undergoing treatment

Charles underwent seven rounds of chemotherapy in the RUH's Medlock Unit, part of the Dyson Cancer Centre, in December 2024, with the aim of shrinking his tumour in preparation for robotic surgery. This was carried out at the BRI in April 2024, removing the residual tumour, part of his pancreas and spleen, and the surrounding lymph nodes. Following some five additional rounds of chemotherapy at the RUH, Charles completed his treatment; the latest scans from August 2025 show no remaining evidence of cancer.

"From every metric we can measure, including my gradual return to normality, the potential is there for the best outcome," he says.

"We took it one step at a time, looked for any and every positive and, to cut a long story short, here we are."

Charles had nothing but praise for the care he received across both hospitals, who worked closely together throughout his treatment. He describes his surgeons at the BRI as being clear, professional, and reassuring, and of the team in the Medlock Unit he says: "They clearly understand what the people who are going there for care are having to deal with."

"Nothing is too much trouble. I am super grateful for what they did for me and how they made me feel."

Advice for others

Charles says of his experience, "I just tried to make the best of it. I make it up as I go along with a positive mindset and hope that someone can study it one day and say, well, he was one who bucked the trend."

He also advocates for others to seek psychological support during if they feel it's appropriate, either during their treatment or afterwards – he has elected for the latter, and will be receiving this via local charity We Hear You. Support is also available from the RUH.

"I would encourage anyone going through a similar experience to talk to somebody about how you are feeling, even if they find it difficult to say and articulate their emotions. If you are feeling anything other than 100%, you should have the opportunity to talk to somebody."

Looking forward

Charles is now on a phased return to work and is already using his positive experience of illness, treatment and hospital care to support his own patients, feeling that he is better able to help them reveal how they are truly feeling and what they need.

A father of four and grandfather, he and his wife are planning to visit one of his daughters in New Zealand next spring. "Family has been the cornerstone of getting through this period and their love and support has been everything," he says. He is also contemplating a parachute jump during the trip in aid of a pancreatic cancer charity. "What's the worst that can happen!"

If you're concerned

Seeking help early is vital with pancreatic cancer. Key symptoms include:

- Indigestion
- Mid-back pain or discomfort
- Upper tummy pain or discomfort
- Changes to your poo
- Unexplained weight loss
- Loss of appetite
- Jaundice (yellow skin/itchy eyes) – if you experience jaundice, please see your GP or go to A&E immediately
- Nausea and vomiting
- Fatigue

While these symptoms often have other causes, if they persist or worsen, or you notice several together, you should seek medical advice.

As Charles reiterates: “I would encourage anyone and everyone to get checked for symptoms they are concerned about.”

Ends

Notes to Editor:

At the RUH we're proud to put people at the heart of what we do, striving to create an environment where everyone matters. Everyone means the people we care for, the people we work with and the people in our community.

We provide a wide range of services including medicine and surgery, services for women and children, accident and emergency services, and diagnostic and clinical support services.

We also provide specialist services for rheumatology, chronic pain and chronic fatigue syndrome/ME via the Royal National Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases which we acquired in 2015.

In 2021, we acquired Sulis Hospital Bath, an independent hospital that provides care for both private and NHS patients. This has enabled us to provide more care for NHS patients, as well as continuing to provide private care to those who choose it. Any additional income earned through private care is reinvested in services for the benefit of the people we care for at both Sulis and the RUH.

Our new Dyson Cancer Centre brings together many of the RUH's cancer services under one roof to provide a cancer services hub for over 500,000 people in the South West. The centre includes the RUH's oncology, chemotherapy and radiotherapy services, a 22-bed inpatient ward, a dedicated pharmacy, research team and nuclear medicine and physics teams.

A key feature of the new centre is the Macmillan Wellbeing Hub. The three-storey hub provides a welcoming, non-clinical space designed around the needs of patients and their families. It also includes comfortable accommodation where relatives and loved ones can stay overnight.



Royal United Hospitals Bath

NHS Foundation Trust

We work closely with other health and care organisations as members of the Bath and North East Somerset, Swindon and Wiltshire Integrated Care Board. We strive to improve the health and wellbeing of the people in our community by working together build one of the healthiest places to live and work.

We are rated 'Good' by the Care Quality Commission (CQC).

For more information about the Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust visit: www.ruh.nhs.uk