

GRAZIA
BREAST
CANCER
AWARENESS



BEATING BREAST CANCER:

ONE IN EIGHT WOMEN WORLD-WIDE WILL BE DIAGNOSED WITH BREAST CANCER

during their lifetime. Charlotte Pedersen tells *Grazia* why she refused to let her illness win



“I was determined that cancer wouldn't kill me or take over my life”

“WE HAVE A SAYING IN DENMARK: FORTY, FAT AND FINISHED. It couldn't have applied to me more. A year ago, I was really enjoying life. I was looking forward to 2009 as I was going to be turning 40, and my husband Michael and I were going to be celebrating our tenth wedding anniversary. We moved to Bahrain six years ago from Denmark, with our two children, Frederik, eight, and Anne-Catrine, six. We really were having the time of our lives. At the time, I'd have described myself as an easy-going, content person. Life was simple – I just wanted everyone around me to be happy.

Thinking back about my health, I suppose the only thing which was a bit unusual was that last October I started to lose a lot of hair – each day almost a handful was coming out. I put it down to the stress of the credit crunch. But when I went back to Denmark in December my mum noticed something wasn't right and she encouraged me to check it out.

When I returned to Bahrain, the doctor couldn't find anything wrong. Funnily enough, I happened to bump

into my old gynaecologist, and she suggested I go and visit her. On January 4, she gave me a full check-up and found a small lump the size of a pea in my breast.

She explained to me that it could be anything – possibly some scar tissue from breast reduction surgery I'd had in 1992 – but she recommended that I have it examined, especially taking my age into consideration.

I wasn't worried at all. I'd had small water cysts in my breasts before, so I was sure it was just the same thing again. Plus, it was only six months since I'd had my last full check-up, when nothing had been found. There was no history of breast cancer in my family, so I didn't think I was remotely at risk.

So, five days later, I had a mammogram. The lump was actually the size of a date. I had an ultrasound straight away, followed by a biopsy. Strangely, I was still relatively unconcerned, but, when the results of the biopsy didn't come through on time, I started to feel anxious. I called the laboratory and they said they would email me the results that afternoon. I assumed that if they were emailing them to me rather than phoning or insisting I go to the clinic, then nothing could be wrong. I was so relieved, I went straight round to a friend's house and told her my good news.

I came home, made dinner, and then checked my emails, chatting with Michael at the same time. The report was there but was full of Latin medical terms that Michael had to Google to translate. When we managed to



“If I had just one piece of advice it would be **HAVE AN ANNUAL MAMMOGRAM.** Find a good doctor you can trust, and if you have any concerns please **DON'T IGNORE THEM.**”

Words: Danielle Simpson Photos: George Dipin

Bahrain resident Charlotte Pedersen, left and inset, has been given the all clear after a mastectomy, radiotherapy and chemo

» decipher the terminology, the shock was overwhelming: I had cancer. I was scared, but also angry. Why had the hospital emailed me the results instead of telling me face to face? I switched onto automatic pilot, not thinking about the enormity of the situation or allowing myself to have any morbid thoughts.

I phoned them first thing the next morning and an appointment was arranged to see a specialist. Two weeks and two days after finding a lump, I had a full mastectomy.

Michael and I had agreed from the start to be completely open and honest with the kids. We didn't want to alarm them, so we told them that 'mummy's breast is sick and the doctor needs to take it away'. Michael brought them to visit me in hospital, so they could see for themselves what was happening. Anne-Catrine was very curious and asked a lot of questions, which I insisted on answering for her. I told her that although the doctor had taken my breast away, he'd give me a new one later. No mother ever wants to be sick in front of her children, but all the while, I allowed them to see the bandages and later, the scars. Michael and I both felt it important not to keep my illness from them.

I told my friends immediately and was overwhelmed by their support. Looking back at that time, I think the speed of the treatment, and the fact that I had to research what my diagnosis meant myself, stopped me from falling into a black hole of despair. Honestly, I was surprised by my own reaction. Suddenly I became this strong, angry woman. My husband didn't recognise me. He'd always been the strong one, now the roles were reversed as he tried to cope with the frightening prospect of losing me. But that was something I wasn't willing to consider. 'A small percentage of cases die, so why should I be one of them?' I demanded. It was the mantra that I stuck to throughout my treatment.

I'm an only child, and have always been very close to my mum. My dad died of cancer 17 years ago, and last summer she was treated for skin cancer. She came through it ok, but I felt I couldn't just call her and say:

'By the way Mum, I'm having my breasts removed.' So 12 days after I had the mastectomy, I made the trip to Denmark – against the advice of my husband and doctors – to tell her face-to-face. She was devastated, but rallied behind me, reminding me that I'm an incredibly strong woman and that I'd get through this.

After my mastectomy, I had six treatments of chemotherapy, followed by 28 sessions of radiotherapy. It's strange, but having my breasts removed was



not as traumatic for me as the chemotherapy. Breast reconstruction is so good now that I didn't see that as a problem. However the chemotherapy really sapped my spirit. The final two sessions in particular were horrible. Losing my hair two weeks after my first chemotherapy session was not a happy time, and I hated putting on weight from the treatment and getting more wrinkles.

It was very important to me to keep life as normal as possible for the children, and my friends and family really helped me with this. Even when I felt vile from the treatment I always put on my make-up, and had a smile on my face. When I was feeling low, I surrounded myself with positive people and forced myself to ask for help, whether it was with the school run or getting to and from specialist appointments.

I completed my last treatment of radiotherapy on August 30 this year and felt like I'd achieved something

amazing. Breast cancer took away eight months of my life but fortunately, I am oestrogen-negative so I won't have to go through five years of hormonal treatment. I just have to attend regular check ups and will have breast reconstruction next spring.

I was determined from the start that cancer would not kill me or take over my life. Breast cancer taught me so much about who I am and what I'm capable of. I've learned how important it is to appreciate what you

Charlotte was determined not to keep her illness from her children, below left and bottom. Her husband Michael, below, supported her throughout



have, rather than dwelling on what you don't. If I had just one piece of advice it would be to have an annual check-up and mammogram. Find a good doctor you can trust, and if you have any concerns don't ignore them. A friend told me that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I think he's right, and I know I'll take this 'strong me' forward into my future life." ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Visit www.safeandsound.org for more information to support Breast Awareness in the UK