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CANCER



By JILL FOSTER

HAVING a camera lens fixed on your face is enough to faze anyone but the most experienced TV presenter. But 74-year-old Annie Noonan looks the epitome of calm professionalism as she chats to the film crew at Cork University Hospital.

With a smile on her face, and the directness of a reporter, she relays the devastating news she has just been given — that the niggling chest pains which have stopped her from sleeping are, in fact, due to inoperable lung cancer.

'I thought the doctor was going to say I needed an operation — I had all my lovely pyjamas all sorted, ready to go,' she says, dry-eyed. 'Now it looks like I'll be getting rid of all my bits and pieces.'

'If they say I've only got two years, I know it's going to be less than that,' she adds.

This is the kind of raw, unvarnished reality presented in an astonishing new documentary series that follows 12 courageous cancer patients from their diagnosis right through to recovery, or, sadly for some, death.

Filmed over nine months in Cork University Hospital, the Mercy Hospital and the South Infirmary, the six-part series offers a unique insight into the type of dark journey that the 20,000 Irish people diagnosed with cancer must take every year. And for 7,500 of them, it is a fatal diagnosis.

Thanks to the bravery of those like Annie who took part in this show, we are given privileged access to the stories behind the statistics, and with them, a message of hope.

'Many people think that someone with cancer looks skeletal and will be constantly nauseated,' says Dr Seamus O'Reilly, the consultant oncologist who has treated all 12 patients featured in *Me And The Big C*.

'In fact, it's often difficult to tell which is the patient, the doctor or the family member. What strikes you is how normal people with cancer are. They are living normal lives.'

One such 'normal' survivor is 36-year-old father-of-three Cormac O'Sullivan. Cormac, from Mallow, Co. Cork, was diagnosed with bowel cancer during Christmas 2006.

By that stage, the cancer had spread, with secondary tumours in his liver. He was operated on immediately and is still having chemotherapy more than a year later.

'It was a huge shock,' he says. 'My wife, Rose, was pregnant with our third child and we were very taken aback. Christmas was put on hold.'

A few days after diagnosis, I was in hospital having an operation. I stayed there for 18 days. It was successful but then I was told it had spread and I'd need chemo.'

When Cormac's chemotherapy began last January, the filmmakers approached him about taking part in the series. He said he'd think about it once he had his first session behind him.

'By May I decided to go ahead because I felt that taking part was like having a donor card — it would have a positive impact on someone else's life. If I can show that cancer is tough but you can get through it, that's grand.'

The cameras follow Cormac over several months of chemotherapy, and its side effects.

'I don't want to do much after it,' he says, lying on his sofa at home and looking flushed.

'I feel a bit hot and tired, as though I've got a flu. I'd like to lie here. The children want me to go out and play, they have no idea what cancer is — and that's appropriate. What's the point in telling them? I just say I'm sick and have a bug in my tummy.'

One of the side effects of his chemotherapy is that Cormac cannot enjoy food.

'I've lost my sense of taste,' he says. 'You bite into something you like, but it's just tasteless. It has a huge effect on how I eat —

it's hard to eat tasteless food.'

But it's not just Cormac's illness that gets the full *Big Brother* treatment. The cameras follow him into the maternity ward where wife Rose is giving birth to a 7lbs 3oz boy, Ethan. Surely that couldn't have been easy for either Cormac or Rose?

'We're both very private people,' he says. 'But we both agreed that if taking part in this series could help people, then it would be worth doing.'

Though filming has finished, Cormac's battle persists. His prognosis is uncertain, and he is taking it one year at a time. But he remains optimistic.

'It's about disease management rather than cure,' he explains. 'I had a scan earlier this week and there's no progression since the last one eight weeks ago. So I'm stabilising. As long as I can cope with the drugs, I'm doing fine. The fact that I'm young and healthy helps.'

It is a stoic and brave remark that is characteristic of the others who took part in *Me And The Big C*; sufferers everywhere clearly begin to regard even the slightest improvement as a victory — and the greatest defeat as simply a minor setback.

Harrowing, brave and compelling. A groundbreaking series charts the daily reality of living with the Big C in Ireland...

Take the moment that Kate McNamara, an attractive 52-year-old fitness instructor suffering from ovarian cancer, is told that chemotherapy will not only cause the loss of her hair, but her eyebrows and eyelashes, too.

'A new experience,' she smiles, her calm and dignified exterior masking the significance what she's just been told.

Ollie Power, a 56-year-old father-of-three, is similarly resilient and upbeat. Ollie is featured on the programme three months after his surgery for throat cancer.

Like Cormac O'Sullivan, Ollie is usually a private person. But his illness changed that.

'I wanted to show that cancer doesn't always have to mean a death sentence and that the doctors in our area of Ireland are fully up to speed with cancer treatments,' he says.

It has been quite the journey for the man from Carrigaline, Co. Cork. It was late 2006 when Ollie realised something was awry. 'I had a lump just below my Adam's apple, on the right-hand side. It didn't go away after a few weeks, so I went to the doctor. She knew straight away that it was a problem.'