

## Four doctors said it was harmless

Fiona Jones gently rubbed in her moisturiser then paused. At the base of her neck she could feel a lump about the size of a walnut. "I'd better get the doctor to look at this", she thought.

As a staff nurse in a breast-screening centre she knew how important it was that any lumps were checked. The trouble was, with three children plus a baby, a new job and a recent house move, there never seemed to be the time.

Over the next few weeks Fiona's fingers often strayed to the lump to check if it had gone.

"You really should see a doctor", said her husband Mick. "I know you're worried about it."

But it was nearly three months before Fiona saw a GP, who told her it was a harmless swollen gland that would go away on its own.

It didn't. Four weeks later Fiona saw a different doctor. The lump was near her thyroid gland, so the GP ordered a blood test, which showed that the gland was working normally.

Yet Fiona was still uneasy. Where she worked, lumps were always investigated. However, she didn't want to bother her colleagues, so she saw a third GP.

He ordered a needle aspiration, where cells would be taken from the lump and then checked under a microscope.

Fiona worked a shift before the test and sat with a woman who was having a needle aspiration of a breast lump. She tried to calm the patient and suppress her own fear at the same time.

Fiona's result was normal and finally she felt reassured. But this time the doctor decided to refer her to a throat specialist.

The specialist also thought the lump was innocent but said he would remove it, along with half the thyroid gland, "just to be sure".

When Fiona came round after the anaesthetic, he told her the lump looked harmless.

"I'll see you in three weeks", he said. "I should be able to sign you off then."

On the day of the appointment Mick was due to return to his job on a North Sea oil rig.

"I can stay if you need me", he said. "Oh, it's just routine", Fiona replied. "I'll be fine."

But the surgeon told her the lump was cancerous. He removed the rest of her thyroid.

Two months later Fiona was sent for radioiodine treatment, a type of internal radiotherapy.

She was booked into a lead-lined hospital room with its own bathroom and kitchenette, where she would stay alone for five days.

A man wearing protective clothing brought her a single radioactive pill, which she had to swallow. Feeling that she was taking poison, Fiona washed it down with water.

Over the next few days she felt tired and nauseous. She had to drink two to three litres of water a day to flush out the radiation and was constantly running to the loo.

“It’s just like being pregnant again”, she told Mick on the telephone.

The treatment took away her appetite, so meals often ended up in the bin. Fiona read books and watched films — something she seldom had time for at home. It was a strange kind of holiday.

When Fiona returned home she wasn’t allowed to see the children for ten days in case her radioactive treatment affected their thyroid glands.

Before she was finally diagnosed, Fiona had told her 11-year-old son Sean that she didn’t have cancer. Now she told him the truth. She wanted him to know that many people are successfully treated.

Looking back, Fiona, 33, of Inverness, Highland, can hardly believe she ignored the lump for so long.

“These days I nag my family and friends to go to the doctor if there’s anything They’re worried about,” she says. “I know how easy it is to get so busy that you don’t look after yourself.”

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