

Ex-army medic Katrina home and on the mend

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A FORMER medic who was under a death sentence from a rare disease is recovering at home after life-saving treatment in America.

Supporters, including Standard readers raised more than £110,000 to send Katrina Brown, 32, to Chicago for a pioneering procedure for systemic sclerosis by Dr Richard Burt after she was told it was not available on the NHS.

Now the ex-soldier, who was exposed to depleted uranium on a posting to Iraq 10 years ago, wants to help other people with the condition.

She flew out at the end of March for the gruelling treatment that started with a dose of chemotherapy.

"That knocked me sideways," she said. "I was alright at the hospital but when they discharged me I spent three days in bed at the hotel throwing up. It was just horrible. Charlie was so worried he phoned Dr Burt at 5am on a Sunday."

The doctor prescribed medication to ease her suffering. After that she faced 10 days of painful shots before she had enough extra stem cells for harvesting.

Katrina thought she would be able to administer them herself, but in the end it was Charlie, also a medic, who had to give them. Her bones ached as they made more cells and when the time came for them to be harvested she was strapped to the table.

"Out of everything, that point was the worst," she said. After 10 hours attached to a machine she was left to recover for just over a week before a second, longer bout of chemo to completely knock out her immune system.

This time things went relatively smoothly and a week later she was ready for her stem cells to be replaced. She had been warned there could be a bad reaction, but nothing happened.

"The day you get your stem cells you're not actually at your lowest point. That comes the day after. That is when you have got no immune system whatsoever," she explained.

But within a few days she had already started to notice improvements to her joints. It was Charlie who first spotted her walking had improved. Gradually her skin started to soften and movement in her hands began to return.

Dr Burt warned her she still had antibodies that were linked to the disease so she went through a third dose of chemo to lower their levels and cut the chances the disease recurring.

When she was well enough to be discharged she went to stay with US friends Britney Shulz-Helm and her mum Marlene. She had met them through Facebook and Britney had gone through the same treatment.

"When you get out of hospital you feel really scared, but they had been through it before. It was a bit like going home I suppose. They understood what I was going through.

"They are incredible people. They didn't really know me and they really looked after me."

Two weeks ago she and Charlie returned to South Cerney and while he is back at work she is continuing her recovery and preparing to lend her support to others with the condition.

Although her health is improving she knows she will be left with scarring on her lungs and some damage to her heart. But the palpitations are gone. "I could feel it stopping, skipping beats and going really fast. It was all over the place."

She joked: "Now I can't feel it I keep checking that I've got a pulse."

Katrina wants to raise awareness of the treatment which is set to be trialled in Sheffield on multiple sclerosis patients. She also wants to help other scleroderma patients raise money so they can have the same treatment she underwent.

She said: "I want to help them in any way I can.

Visit katrinastreatment.org for more details.

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