

## Finding Balance and Growth: Anne Mathieson



I took a break from working as a GP when I was diagnosed with Stage 3 Bowel Cancer in April 2019. Initially I had a huge burden of guilt around stopping work as I had only been in my new job for 3 months before I was diagnosed. Before that I had been on maternity leave for 15 months with my second child, so I felt like I had just had a long break from work and I was only just getting back into the swing of it. However, the idea of work felt too difficult while my head was distracted dealing with my own emotions and the practicalities of appointments.

After I had my surgery and first met with my oncologist one of the first questions he asked was “when are you planning on returning to work?” At this stage I had not even considered this as I had only been out of hospital a few days following 2 surgeries, so I was a little shocked at the question as work was not something that had even entered my mind. The idea of dealing with appointments, treatments and side effects and managing a family with 2 children under 5 felt more than enough to me. I was advised to start working as soon as I was able to and told this was to give me something else to think about that was not cancer.

After a discussion with my husband, I decided to stay off work for longer. The idea of being in and out of work while my mind was elsewhere felt too difficult. I proceeded to have 3 months of chemotherapy and am extremely glad I did not work through it. With the side effects I would have struggled to get any consistency in my work, and I enjoyed giving the energy I did have to my family, rather than to work.

My treatment finished in August and I got very unwell with my last round of chemotherapy. I took just over a month to recover from it. Once I had recovered physically, I went back to working part time again. With hindsight, I feel that I rushed back a bit sooner than I should have due to an internal pressure I placed on myself which was contributed to by the specialist’s comments.

Around 3 months later COVID started to unfold around the world. From New Zealand we watched with increasing worry about what was happening overseas. Then, at the end of March 2020 as the case numbers here started being confirmed the government decided to place New Zealand in Level 4 lockdown and the GP college announced that all GPs were to start working virtually, where possible, to help prevent the spread of COVID. With all the uncertainty of COVID my workplace supported me to start working remotely over this period.

Working in General Practice during this time was bizarre. Moving from the panic of the month leading up to the lockdown which settled and suddenly patients just stopped calling. It was very quiet and we went from being fully booked to only seeing 1 to 2 patients a

session. While not great for business, I think this period was what I needed to slow down and have some space to begin to process everything I had been through.

In New Zealand we were incredibly lucky that COVID was quickly brought under control and we returned to normal life quickly compared to the rest of the world. For me this meant returning to work and it was busier than ever as people tried to deal with all the problems they had been holding on to over the lockdown period.

With the stresses of a busy job and balancing 2 small children I was finding I started to question what I was doing in my career and how much of a difference I was really making. That is when I heard about “Working with Cancer” and decided to contact them.

I found my coach incredibly valuable. I was initially told not to make any decisions as my energy was low and I needed more space and relaxation than I had been getting. It was refreshing having the pressure taken off me. My first step was to prioritise some me time and relaxation as it was apparent I wasn't getting any space and really needed this to help me deal with all my emotions and thoughts which had followed my physical recovery.

Having that space made a big difference and is something I am still trying to maintain. Once I was in a better place, we looked at my motivators. I considered how what I was doing currently fit with what motivates me and what I wanted to be doing. Going through this process helped me see that my job satisfaction is good and that I do love what I do.

However, I also realised that I wanted another dimension to my work where I felt like I could make a difference, particularly given what I have been through. It was following this that I approached Bowel Cancer New Zealand and now have a voluntary role with them as a Medical Advisor. I am really looking forward to working with them to help with individuals and to help the charity with education, and advocacy.

My experiences have taught me a lot and with the help of working with cancer I have learnt many skills over the last year. I think my experiences have helped me to develop perspective, compassion, and skills to make me a better clinician. I am excited about my work and feel like I have developed a much better life balance and as a result I am enjoying my family more too.