



CHRIS FIELD

2019-20 MOLLY APPEAL — PATIENT STORY

New immunotherapy agent reverses aggressive melanoma

What started off looking like an ingrown hair follicle turned into a terrifying diagnosis for Dr. Chris Field, a retired professor of mathematics and statistics at Dalhousie University in Halifax, N.S.

“It was a small lump on my upper left arm, below the surface,” recounts Chris. “My family doctor was not very concerned about it, but she measured it and then measured it again in a couple of months and it had grown. So she did a biopsy and when it came back as positive for melanoma she referred me to a plastic surgeon to have it removed.”

Waiting for the surgery and biopsy results was nerve-racking for Chris, who had lost a brother to melanoma in 2012 and had previously had a basal cell carcinoma removed from his arm.

“I was always very vigilant about what to look for on my skin,” he notes. “This lump was so odd, as there was no colour and it never broke the surface.”

The plastic surgeon removed not only the lump and some surrounding tissue, but also several “sentinel” lymph nodes from the nearby area of Chris’s underarm. The lump itself turned out to be stage two melanoma and one of the lymph nodes was also affected. Because of the lymph node involvement, Chris required more surgery to remove the rest of the lymph nodes from under his arms.

After a year of watchful waiting, with regular dermatologist checkups, Chris’ cancer surgeon discovered another similar lump, also on his upper left arm. Diagnostic imaging scans revealed evidence of cancer on his lower back and also on his lung.



His cancer had progressed from stage two at diagnosis to stage four. Surgery would not be enough.

Fortunately for Chris, a new immunotherapy agent called pembrolizumab had recently been approved and made available in Nova Scotia. Unlike chemotherapy, which directly kills cancer cells and has harsh, often-debilitating side effects, immunotherapy takes away cancer cells' ability to hide from and suppress the immune system. The immune system takes care of the cancer from there.

"The only side effect I experienced from the immunotherapy was an occasional minor rash," says Chris, who received the intravenous treatment every three weeks for two years. "Just three months into the treatment, they found that it had stopped any further growth of the melanoma."

Now, one year out from treatment, Chris is and continues to be cancer-free.

"I feel very blessed that this treatment was available," he says. "If I had been diagnosed even five years earlier, I would not be alive right now."

Chris is enthusiastically supportive of Dalhousie Medical Research Foundation's Molly Appeal and the research it supports.

"Thanks to research, we've seen dramatic improvements in cancer survival over the past five to ten years," Chris says. "I'm proud to know that we have such great doctors and scientists right here in the Maritimes doing ground-breaking work in cancer immunotherapy."

One of those doctors is Dr. Carman Giacomantonio, a cancer surgeon and scientist who is working on new immunotherapy strategies for fighting cancer. He injected Chris' tumour with one of his experimental treatments, which stopped its growth for a period of time. Dr. Giacomantonio is relying on funds raised through this fall's Molly Appeal to purchase sophisticated new mass spectrometry equipment that will dramatically accelerate his progress in perfecting this and other cancer immunotherapies.

Even though he is free from melanoma and feeling good, Chris has had to come to terms with the fragility of life. The treatment is working, but he has no guarantee that the cancer will not return. He does not, however, let this interfere with his enjoyment of life. He is an avid birdwatcher and gardener, and he loves to ride his bike, even in the city. As professor emeritus, he still supervises graduate students and collaborates with his colleagues, which also brings great satisfaction.

"It was a very frightening experience, but now life is great," he says.

"I see a doctor for follow-up every three months and have a scan every six months... it's very reassuring. The care I've received has been superb, I feel very lucky."

