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# The fight for life and love: little known therapy cures Bendigo woman's cancer

By LAUREN MITCHELL Feb. 9, 2012, 5:41 a.m.



**Tweet** ELIZABETH Mitchell and her daughter Jenny Chow share a bond quite unlike any other. When you've faced the darkest of days with another and emerged triumphant, it's got to make a relationship stronger. When Elizabeth refused to undergo chemotherapy for the cancer that was diagnosed to end her life, she started a chain of events that would ultimately save her. Today, three years after what Elizabeth describes as her "use by date", she's preparing to start a new life with her daughter in Adelaide - cancer free. In October 2008, the then 76-year-old Elizabeth was diagnosed with colon cancer. After part of her bowel was removed, it was discovered the cancer had already metastasized, and subsequently spread to her lungs, liver, adrenal gland and peritoneum. She was given six to 12 months to live without treatment. At best another year with chemotherapy. "I know what chemo does to people and if that's all I have left, why do I want to make myself sick?" was Elizabeth's response. Jenny came to

Bendigo from Adelaide to nurse her mother, but she had other plans than to watch her mum die. "Receiving the oncologist's prognosis was such a shock, but I remember saying, 'we'll see about that!'" she said. Jenny began a marathon task of sifting the internet for information on alternative cancer treatments. "I devoured the information – I probably took on more than I should have," she said. "I was spending up to 16 hours a day on the internet, plus looking after mum." Among the "reams and reams" of information, two treatments stood out; radio wave therapy offered at a Perth clinic, and Photodynamic Therapy, or PDT - a little-known therapy that uses a combination of a drug and laser light to kill cancer-affected cells. After much agonising and family discussions, to Jenny's relief, Elizabeth finally chose the latter. It held the most promise and would take the least time, and time was not on her side. "PDT uses an organic substance, which acts as a sensitizer. This is infused into the body with a drip," Jenny said. "The nature of the molecules in the sensitizer mean that it is taken up preferentially by the cancer cells." The sensitizer is activated by using a particular frequency of non-thermal laser applied from outside the body through the skin. This causes a reaction in the cells with the sensitizer that causes them to shut down. "As a cell dies and takes itself apart, it releases certain antigens that act like an immunization." Jenny found two Australian researchers working with the treatment, and a doctor willing to administer it. Because Elizabeth's cancer was deemed terminal, she was given an exemption under the Therapeutic Goods Administration special access scheme, as PDT is not available in the hospital system. "We were put in touch with four people who'd had the PDT – two had had it for cancer – and they were just so impressed with the results," Jenny said. Elizabeth paid the \$10,000 treatment fee then travelled to Adelaide where the therapy was administered over five days – one day for the sensitizer, followed by four days of four-hour laser sessions. Elizabeth said apart from the sensitizer drip and mild flu symptoms on the first night, the treatment was non-invasive and relaxing. Subsequent scans showed all the tumors progressively disappearing, bar two in the liver. Jenny said they were initially told the PDT wouldn't kill the cancerous cells in the liver, as that organ was dense with blood and the red laser light would not be absorbed. "Even without the scans, it was fascinating seeing Mum's physical response to the treatment," she said. "In the first couple of days she was very fatigued (I had read about fatigue caused by cancer cell death). Within a week however, her complexion started to improve, her energy levels picked up markedly and even her hair started to look better." Jenny and Elizabeth then went back to the oncologist with the new scans. "The oncologist said, 'I've just spent 30 minutes trying to sort out these scans. Obviously a lot's transpired since we last met'," Jenny said. "But when we started to tell her about the PDT she didn't want to know." "I guess this could affect vested interests," Elizabeth said. "If this takes off, the drug companies will lose millions in chemotherapy." Jenny also asked the oncologist; "Now all the other legions are resolved, can my mum have liver surgery?" She looked at me and said, 'Your mother is 76 and has metastatic cancer, no surgeon

in Australia would touch her'. "Jenny felt like she'd hit a major brick wall. "We'd come so far, but if we couldn't find a liver surgeon Mum would still die." At that point, a chance 10 minute viewing of "Last Chance Surgery" unbelievably led to finding the surgeon they needed. Ten and a half hours of surgery later, the cancerous part of Elizabeth's liver was removed and her bowel and abdomen checked for further tumors. "The surgeon actually suspected further tumors in the bowel, but when he resected, it was clear - only some calcifications," Jenny said. It took some months before Elizabeth fully recovered, but she did, and today she is full of life – not to mention praise for the support of her family. "I have to have a scan every year for five years. The last one in December (two years after the liver surgery) was all clear," she said. Now Elizabeth can think about the future. Her Golden Square California Bungalow sold at auction last weekend, and she's set to move to Adelaide to live with Jenny. Jenny described the fight for her mum's life as an unexpectedly beautiful time together. "When mum was diagnosed I knew I had to nurse her and I was happy to do that but I was scared because I didn't know if I had the compassion and the tenacity to deal with it," Jenny said. "But it's actually been a precious experience – it's drawn us both together, and actually, we've had a lot of fun." The pair is sharing their story to make others aware of PTD. "Hopefully it will encourage somebody to do some more research," Jenny said. "The treatment mum had in the form she had it in isn't really available here now, which is sad." But there is a clinic in the UK doing similar treatment in a methodical, more controlled way. "The website for that clinic is [killingcancer.co.uk](http://killingcancer.co.uk)."

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