

The Telegraph

Doctors thought I was suffering from anxiety - it was an inoperable brain tumour



When Baroness Tessa Jowell [spoke so movingly](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/01/24/not-afraid-says-tessa-jowell-speaks-brain-cancer-first-time/) in the House of Lords last month, calling for greater collaboration in cancer research, and more funding for brain cancer treatments (for which outcomes have remained static for more than 20 years), her inspiring words set into motion a debate which last week saw the Government deliver [£45 million in funding](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/01/25/peers-tears-hail-tessa-jowells-moving-cancer-speech-house-lords/) for the very causes she had spoken up for.

Standing in that great hall on a cold winter's day, wrapped in woollen scarves and a lilac cashmere hat, the former culture secretary received a rare standing ovation from her fellow peers after backing the Eliminate Cancer Initiative (ECI), which seeks to find research breakthroughs through greater access to clinical trials, as she recalled Seamus Heaney's last words: "Noli timere", do not be afraid. "I am not afraid," she said, "but I am fearful that this new and important approach may be put into the 'too difficult box'. I hope this debate will give hope to other cancer patients like me."

[Today, in a peaceful home in south west London, Richard and Mary Powell know intimately the same dreadful battle which Dame Tessa and her family are facing](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/09/17/dame-tessa-jowell-has-battling-brain-cancer-since-may-family/). [Like](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/09/17/dame-tessa-jowell-has-battling-brain-cancer-since-may-family/)

[Dame Tessa](#), Richard's diagnosis seemed to come from nowhere. At 55, he was a fit, healthy father-of-two who did a City job he loved and which took him all over the world. He spent every spare moment with his two sons (Joshua, 19, and Conor, 21) or out on his bike, bombing around Richmond Park - one of the "lycra devils", as Mary jokingly calls him. But nine months ago, while hillwalking in Scotland, Richard began to lose the ability to speak mid-conversation. "Richard just turned to me and it looked as if he'd gone a bit vacant in his eyes," Mary recalls. "His mouth was twisted slightly to one side and he was trying to make sounds.

"A shiver went down my backbone. I'd never seen this happen before. But I thought maybe it had been an emotional reaction. I now know that the tumour is lodged in a part of the brain that affects your emotions."

Richard was experiencing the first of what would become a series of increasingly dangerous seizures. He had been tired and emotional for a few days, but had put it down to a particularly busy time at work (his top job in aviation insurance meant he was responsible for teams in London, Europe and Singapore). By that evening, when they returned to London, he was becoming increasingly vacant, and kept slipping into periods of being unable to speak.

Mary took Richard to A&E, where the doctor diagnosed a stress related speech disorder, and referred him to the GP, whom he saw the next day. "She made an appointment with a neurologist, but that was for three months' time. They were pretty sure it was something psychological, but they just wanted to rule out the possibility that it could be something different. Can you imagine if we'd waited that long to get a scan?"

That night, Mary was woken at 2am by the entire bed shaking; Richard was fitting violently next to her. "One side of my body was knocking and I was choking," Richard tells me, sitting beside his wife on the burnt orange sofa in their cosy living room. "Mary called one of our sons, Joshua, in to hold me while she called the ambulance."

"The first time we sat and talked about what it meant, we were all in tears"

"It was terrifying," says Mary. "I thought he was dying. It was awful. All I could think to do was to hold onto him somehow."

Paramedics warned St George's Hospital to expect a possible stroke victim, as Richard's symptoms seemed to suggest. Half an hour later, a CT scan revealed it was something far more serious. A doctor told Richard he had a brain tumour, and worse, its location meant that it was inoperable.

Doctors hoped it would turn out to be benign, but a biopsy two weeks later showed that it was a very fast growing, grade four tumour which in just two weeks had doubled in size. "The oncologist at the Royal Marsden said look, we're not giving you any hope because this is a very dangerous tumour, it's not good news at all. But we'll do our best for you," remembers Richard.



This is the moment so many cancer patients the world over will sadly be all too familiar with. “The doctor has said to remain cautiously optimistic, but that’s very hard,” says Mary. “Living with uncertainty is the most difficult part of the whole thing. You’re completely lost and you’re searching for answers.”

“You’re given a diagnosis that you might not be here at Christmas time. How do you figure out how to pull the different elements of your life together? You go into shock.”

Telling their boys was, they say, one of the hardest things to do. “The first time we sat and talked about what it meant, we were all in tears.”

“The boys were afraid of the conversation, but afterwards they said somehow it was a relief to have talked about the elephant in the room.”

“You just have to navigate it with whatever inner resources you have, hold onto each other as much as you can”

Richard embarked on a gruelling round of chemotherapy and radiotherapy to try to shrink the tumour, which his oncologist believes appeared two or three months before his seizures began.

“If it had been on the other side of Richard’s head, it could have been taken out,” says Mary. “Yes but the good news is it’s shrunk, it’s shrunk by half a centimetre, which is great,” says Richard cheerfully.

Mary smiles at her husband, with whom she will celebrate her 28th wedding anniversary next month. “Richard is just...” she turns to him, wiping away tears. “You’re so stoic. He sees it as going well. I see a very tired person going through really harsh treatment.”

“Sometimes I wake in the night and check that he’s still breathing. I know Richard sometimes reaches out at night just to make sure I’m there, because... the thought of someone you love slipping away... you need a little bit of reassurance.”



If they have learnt anything in the past nine months, Mary says, it's that cancer is not a great "fight" as it is so often described. "You just have to navigate it with whatever inner resources you have, hold onto each other as much as you can, remember how much you love the person, and know that you have friends."

Richard has just begun his second round of chemotherapy, after a relatively successful first round. In three months' time a new scan will show whether the treatment is working - good news being either a stabilisation of the growth, or further shrinkage.

If the treatment goes well, Richard hopes to create some semblance of normality in the coming months and return to work. "I hope to, but there's no point me going back and collapsing. There are lots of questions I don't know the answer to."

For now, Richard and Mary are trying to do exactly what the doctor has told them: to remain cautiously optimistic. Dame Tessa spoke of her wish to see sufferers "living well" with cancer, and that's exactly what Richard, surrounded by his determined wife and loving sons, are trying to do.

"Our lives have been altered unbelievably," says Mary. "The thought of not having Richard is just unbearable."

For now, though, "It's about just being together, and the relief that Richard is still here." When I leave they are still side by side on the sofa, in the warmth of the house they have lived in for 21 years, their dog Lola between them, as the snow falls outside.

Richard's story will feature in 24 hours in A&E, on Channel 4 on Tuesday Feb 27 at 9pm