

Facing up to General Anaesthesia

When it comes up in conversation that I have congenital heart disease I inevitably get asked: have I had any surgery? People often think I must have been very brave, especially as most of it happened when I was a child.



James is a GUCH patient and has had various invasive and non-invasive procedures to palliate complex CHD

It's really nice that people feel this way and I must say, I do think children in particular cope remarkably well with the enormous challenges of growing up with complex health conditions.

However, as we get older I think we become more aware of our health and for me, dealing with surgery means dealing with General Anaesthesia (GA).

Like many of us I feel I have a good understanding of my heart condition and I understand that many of us as a patient group continue to or will at some stage require further intervention. In my view, knowledge is always a positive thing, and key to empowering us as patients, but knowledge can also lead to greater risk awareness which can mean we worry more about things.

On top of this we are all emotional beings, and separating logical thought process from emotion is never easy! I often expect too much of myself in this sense, and guess many of you too, having already been through so much, feel very determined to be 'brave' when facing GA and other medical procedures.

Despite my best efforts, I have cancelled two relatively minor procedures in the past due purely to being nervous about GA, so what is going on? What does that say about me? It is easy to think I am not being brave, that the procedures are small compared to what I've been through so I should be fine. Of course the latter is true, but really it is fairer to admit that being nervous of GA is very human and I should not be hard on myself and so also, we as a patient group should give ourselves a break about being nervous or anxious about GA.

After all, it is a pretty frightening prospect for anyone; undergoing GA means completely trusting in the ability of a clinical team to see one safely through an incredibly vulnerable period.

Therefore, just because I have had my share of procedures doesn't mean I am immune to worries about facing GA. According to research, (Levenson, J. L., 2007) I'm not alone - about a third of patients are concerned about this aspect of surgery.

Psychology studies also support the view that having experienced multiple surgeries in the past can leave one feeling *more* apprehensive, perhaps due to an accumulation of previous experiences as discussed by Dr Liza Morton.

I have heard some people (who have not gone through big procedures themselves) suggest that somehow experience makes it easier, which can be frustrating. No one person has been through the same and personally I think being 'experienced' can make things more difficult.

So rather than trying to dismiss fears of GA, I have found it helpful to find methods of facing up to them and reducing worries to a manageable level. For me personally, this has been through open discussion with family, close friends and the GUCH team (the specialist nurses in particular have been wonderful!). Something which can be helpful is to have time to ask questions, not on the 'day' of the procedure but beforehand, as having time to reflect is really helpful to absorb and process the consultation properly. Some of our questions might seem silly, but having answers rather than trying to make assumptions can be very reassuring. If you want a chance to speak to the surgeon or anaesthetist, why not ask? Remember to bring along a list of questions if you think it would be helpful, or take someone with you. I have found it really reassuring to know that, whatever we have to face, with the support of family and the teams at our hospitals, we are never really alone.

Finally, I like to think of a quote by J. R. R. Tolkien, and remember that often: "Courage is found in unlikely places."

Special thanks to Dr Liza Morton for her help and professional insight into researching and writing this article.

http://www.thesf.org.uk/documents/Emotional-Health/Coping_withsurgery.pdf

By James Cobb

It is completely natural that we feel a range of different emotions when going for surgery. Fear and anxiety are the body's normal response to a threat. Even when you understand that you need surgery to survive, it is difficult to override the body's instinctive response to being hurt.

Understanding these feelings and learning how to better manage them can help. Various strategies can help you to cope with these difficult emotions and feel more in control of what is happening to you (see: TSF's guide on 'Coping with Surgery' as mentioned above).

As James has noted, it can be helpful to speak to your medical team. It is your body and you have the right to know as much as you feel comfortable with. Often it can feel overwhelming talking to doctors, so it is a good idea to write your questions down so that you don't forget them and to note down answers.

It can help to breakdown your concerns and tackle them separately. For example, if anaesthetic makes you nauseous you can ask for medication to manage this. If you are worried about sleeping the night before surgery you may be offered a sleeping pill. On the day you might be offered a Pre-Med which is usually made up of sedatives to try and help you feel calmer before going to theatre. Of course, it is up to you if you want to take these.

It is not unusual to be worried about anaesthetic itself. However, if you feel that your fear is intolerable and you cannot manage it with these techniques then you may have developed a phobia. This could be related to previous difficult experiences or part of post traumatic symptoms. In this case it is important to speak to one of your care providers or GP to ask for specific counselling or psychological input for help overcoming this.

By Dr Liza Morton

This article was written for and published in GUCH News Winter 2014.