

Changing the conversation around work and cancer

I spent most of my working life treating patients with cancer, but until I was diagnosed with cancer myself, I had no idea what a huge impact cancer would have on my own working life. I knew returning to work would be hard, but I didn't realise how hard it would be. I don't think my employers knew, either.

Because unless you or someone close to you has had cancer treatment, you cannot grasp how debilitating the side effects can be, especially those that can't be seen. Trying to explain to your boss that you're tired – and what fatigue means – sheer physical and mental exhaustion despite the fact that you're eating and sleeping well – is exhausting in itself. Explaining that after chemotherapy it's hard enough learning to concentrate again on something more important than what to watch on Netflix, let alone remember what you've been told to do. And then there's the guilt you feel having to arrange colleagues to cover you when you have scans and blood tests and appointments, or using up your precious annual leave. When you look physically well enough to return to work, people don't see the scars under your clothes or the mental and emotional changes you are dealing with. Not everyone is kind and understanding. Because you look OK, you should be back to normal, right...? It shouldn't have to be this hard.

There's no right time to tell a cancer patient what their rights are when it comes to returning to work, and it's wrong to assume that every employer will know what they are as well. You are given so many leaflets when you are diagnosed, many will get left in a pile and never read. What I would love is for every cancer patient to be told what their legal rights are regarding work as soon as they are diagnosed. Tell them that they might not want to look at it then, but they will need it in the future. And with that, include a leaflet to send to their employers with their sick note that reminds them that they have a legal obligation to help that person return to work as well. When one in two people will get cancer in their lifetime, the rights of cancer patients need to be common knowledge. It has to become normal to talk about it.