

2005: The year that was for Riemke and Maarten

Remission

For us this year has been very much focused on the treatment of Maarten's Chronic Myeloid Leukaemia. We concurred with the proposal of our haematologist at the Bronovo Hospital in The Hague to take part in a clinical trial, in which imatinib (Glivec) is combined with cytarabin (a cytostatic drug).

On 17 December of last year Maarten was hospitalised at the Haematology Department of Leiden University Medical Centre (LUMC) for the first course with cytarabin (of two). That went much better than we expected. On the fourth day of cytarabin administration Maarten did not feel too well, but even that turned out to be temporary. He did not really experience any problems and even managed to keep his hair !

Following seven days of receiving a litre of cytarabin solution intravenously every day, Maarten was allowed to go home for Christmas. After that he went back to Leiden to wait for his bone marrow to break down. After a week his white bloodcell count was so low that he had to go into isolated nursing. A week later, he reached the turning point and then recovered rapidly, so that he could go home on 11 January.

In the meantime Maarten's three brothers had been tested for their suitability as stemcell donors in case a stemcell transplantation would be required after all. His oldest brother turned out to be a Human Leukocyte Antigen match.

On 25 January Maarten went back to the LUMC for his second cytarabin treatment. Again, he did not experience any difficulties with the dosing. Because we do not have pets or children at home and because everything had gone so well during the first course, it was proposed that Maarten would stay at home this time round. However, in the night of 10 February he developed a high fever and was admitted to hospital after all. We had a number of rather frightening days, but on 22 February he had recovered and was discharged.

Maarten started his treatment with 80-90 percent of his stemcells being malignant. Following the first cytostatic course this was down to 5 percent and after the second course it had decreased further to 1 percent. In that respect the combination treatment has been very successful in bringing down the number of malignant stemcells quickly.

Recovery

Early April Maarten felt well enough to go back to work again. For two weeks he went to the office for three days a week. After that we went on holiday to the western USA for three weeks and then Maarten went back to work full time.

His half-yearly check-up in August showed that his leukaemia is in complete remission. Even the most sensitive analysis did not show any signs of malignant stemcells. Of course that does not mean that he has got rid of the disease entirely. But fortunately it is now fully under control. What remains are the side effects of imatinib. Maarten continues to be very tired and in October decided to reduce his working week to four days. Every six months we shall evaluate if he wants to continue that way.

Naturally we are elated by the result of the treatment. In January Maarten's blood and bone marrow will be sampled again for analysis and we shall see how things look then. That will also be the formal end of his part in the clinical trial but he continues to take imatinib and will remain in the care of our haematologist at the Bronovo Hospital.

Holidays

In March our driver from Iran and his wife came to visit. We had invited them now as we still knew the staff of the Dutch Embassy in Teheran, which we thought would make the visa application process easier. To obtain a visa for nationals of countries such as Iran is not easy. It requires a mountain load of paperwork, financial guarantees, interviews etc. but it worked.

Following the arrival of our guests we took them to Germany for a week. The parents of our driver and one of his sisters are there awaiting their application for asylum. Our driver had not seen his parents and sister for two-and-a-half years and the visit was naturally quite emotional.

During this week we went our own way and visited the neighbourhood. This was in Thuringia in the former East Germany with well known cities such as Weimar and Jena. It is quite a beautiful part of Germany and many palaces and historic buildings are now being restored, all with financial support from the European Union.

Following our visit to Germany we took our guests to a number of interesting places in the Netherlands. It was a great culture shock, as they had never been outside Iran with the exception of a brief visit to Dubai.

For our trip to the western USA (Washington, Oregon, northern California) we were a bit too early in the year. The National Parks in the Sierra Nevada were only partly accessible because of the snow. Nevertheless we had a wonderful time and we enjoyed seeing our son and daughter in law.

Next year we shall go there again but then somewhat later in the year.

Finally, we went to Naples for a week at the end of October on a cultural visit together with Maarten's father. Maarten's mother died in July after four-and-a-half years in a nursing home. His father has looked after her all that time. And although he was eager to travel again, he did not want to join a tour group on his own. That is why we booked a trip together using a small specialised travel agency, with whom Maarten's parents made a number of journeys in the past.

We stayed in a hotel overlooking the harbour of Naples and in the morning we could see the sun rise behind Mount Vesuvius from the roof terrace, where breakfast was served. Naples has a number of impressive museums and we also much enjoyed a number of day trips in the surroundings of Naples to Pompei, Herculaneum and Paestum to name but a few.

Family concerns

With the death of Maarten's mother there came an end to her long suffering. So with our grief there was also a feeling of relief. For Maarten's father it has of course been very difficult. We have much admiration for his dedication during these last years. We used to go and visit Maarten's mother once a week when she was still alive and then have dinner with his father and we are continuing these visits.

This summer one of Riemke's uncles suffered a stroke. Riemke and her twin sister have been busy to organise nursing care for her aunt and uncle, who do not have any children themselves. Just before Christmas they moved into a nursing home in the north of The Netherlands. During the preceding months Riemke went to Leeuwarden for a day every week.

Riemke's parents also had a number of health problems this year and Riemke used to visit them on her way back home from her aunt and uncle. From that point of view it is useful that we are no longer living abroad.

Dutch University Women

Riemke continues to be busy as president of the The Hague branch of the Netherlands Society of University Women. They celebrated a successful lustrum in November and are now working on a conference on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the European University Women next September in The Hague.

She has also joined the committee of the Association of Political Science Alumni of Leiden University.

Maarten's travels

Although Maarten tries to limit business travel, he has run up a fair mileage since returning to work. He took part in a number of investment reviews, for which he visited Dubai and Nigeria. Just before Christmas he had a job in Gabon, where he had not been for nine years.

Also, he went to London regularly for his work on taskforces of the International Association of Oil and Gas Producers and he attended a workshop in Nova Scotia (Canada) on sound from the exploration and production industry in the marine environment.

Travelling in itself is not a problem, but Maarten's main concern is to be able to maintain his medication. Therefore he tries to be selective as to his travel destinations.

We hope to be able to continue as we are and wish all our friends a happy new year !

The Hague, December 2005

Riemke Riemersma and Maarten Smies