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UNDERTOW MEDIA

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At 27, Stephanie is free of cancer and free of stomach pain for the first time in over 10 years

PHOTOGRAPHY: JAMES ELSBY

I BEAT THE TYPE OF CANCER THAT KILLED STEVE JOBS

After 10 years of illness, Stephanie Day found out she had carcinoid cancer, a disease which affects 8000 Australians. By Lisa Mayo

"I remember having constant stomach pains and gastro-like symptoms from a young age. Doctors would always tell me I suffered from irritable bowel syndrome, and from the age of about 15 I had numerous colonoscopies, which always came back normal. But no matter what I tried, the symptoms were always there and after a few years I just accepted that's the way I would always be: suffering constant pain in my stomach after eating and diarrhoea.

The first signs

"In 2006, when I was 21, I was advised that I had appendicitis and needed to go to the emergency department. Results from my biopsy showed a tumour in my appendix, but I was told it was not cancerous and I had nothing to worry about.

"Thinking everything was fine, I turned up to my follow-up appointment expecting it to be routine, only to be told that the tumour removed from my appendix was in fact cancerous.

"My doctor told me it was a carcinoid tumour, a rare cancer, and gave me the option to have the right side of my large bowel removed. My whole world stopped in that second and everything was a blur. All I could think was: 'I have cancer.'

"I went home and spoke to my family, which was the hardest thing I have ever done. It broke my heart. I could see how distressed they were, trying to put on brave faces for me, but not really succeeding.

+ Did you know? One in 200 cancers diagnosed are of the neuroendocrine variety. They account for 0.5 per cent of all reported Australian cancers.

"I thought that when my bowel was removed, it would fix everything and I would be a 'cancer survivor'.
"When I went in for surgery, I was scared and upset, but it went well and biopsies showed no signs of cancer. I was so happy! I sat in my room for about 20 minutes just letting it sink in.
"I recovered well and went back to work full-time, seeing friends and family and being a normal 22-year-old. I was a different person, though – the experience changed my life. I cherished my family even more and never complained about anything that happened in my life. It was also around this time that I started to fall in love with my amazing partner Darrian.

The disease returns

"But I was still suffering severe bouts of diarrhoea and some discomfort. I was told this was normal due to having a large portion of my bowel removed, but was booked in for a colonoscopy to be on the safe side. Before they removed my bowel, they

scanned my liver and found some very small spots, but I was told they were not dangerous. However, I insisted on a scan of my liver to make sure the spots were not growing and were as harmless as they had told me.

"When my doctor said scans showed four more carcinoid tumours in my liver, my world came crashing down once again. The devastating news was that one of the tumours had grown close to the main blood vessel and could not be operated on because it was far too risky.

"I remember sitting in the doctor's office in shock. All I could think was that I couldn't beat this any more. I had an uncertain future and got depressed. I was living each day waiting to get sick. But when I felt weak and didn't want to keep fighting, one of my friends or family would get me through.

"A turning point came in March 2011, when Darrian and I attended a patient-support group organised by the Unicorn Foundation. When we sat and talked about our experiences and



A lasting legacy

After Apple founder Steve Jobs died last year, the American Carcinoid Cancer Foundation publicly thanked him for bringing about a greater awareness of neuroendocrine cancers, of which carcinoid cancer is one variety.

how we were feeling, it became apparent that I wasn't getting the best treatment available.

"I got a second opinion from Dr John Chen at the Flinders Medical Centre in Adelaide, who said he could operate and try to cure me. There were risks, but I believed it was worth it for the chance to have children and make plans for my future.

Taking a risk

"After speaking to Darrian and my family, I decided to have the surgery. A month later, I went into theatre at 9am and didn't get back to my room until 7.30pm.

"When I woke up, one of the amazing nurses said to me, 'Steph, Dr Chen got it all. The cancer is all gone.'

"I remember bursting into tears of happiness. All of a sudden the pain was gone and I fell asleep for the first time in a long time with a smile on my face! The surgery was a success and all the tumours had been removed. I couldn't believe it.

"Now, my oncologist sees me every three months and if all goes

well over the next year, they can class me as completely cured.

"I feel absolutely incredible. I have no symptoms for the first time in years and I actually feel normal. I have energy, I am happy and I feel so lucky and blessed to be in this place.

"As a result of Steve Jobs' death, more people are learning about the difference between carcinoid and pancreatic cancers. He didn't talk much about this difference but I guess some people want to keep it private. I will spend the rest of my life helping people realise that this disease is out there and it can be cured easily if it is found early.

"I got a second opinion and got my life back. I owe it all to early detection. If I had never had my appendix taken out it would have been too late for me. My advice is not to take your symptoms lightly and never give up on searching for answers – the answer you want may be out there."

+ For more information about carcinoid cancer visit www.unicornfoundation.org.au